Kailash & Guge

Lands of the
Tantric Mountain

Siân Pritchard-Jones & Bob Gibbons

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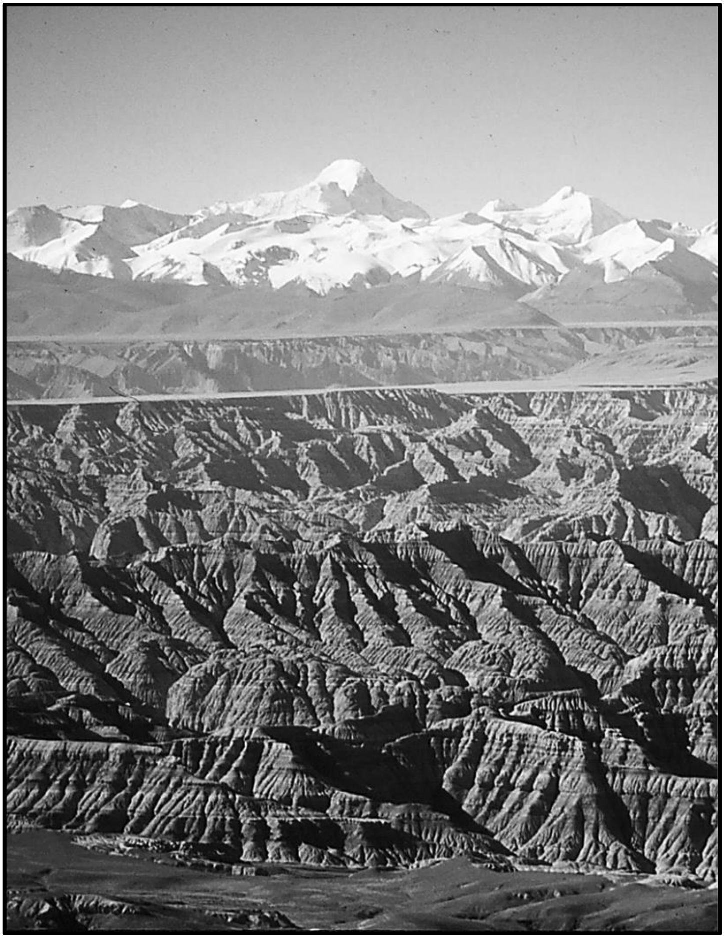
Front cover:	Mount Kailash from the mountain road to Toling
Back cover:	The citadel of Tsaparang Guru Rinpoche, Toling
Title page:	Kamet peak and the extraordinary landscapes of Guge

Kailash & Guge

Lands of the Tantric Mountain



Siân Pritchard-Jones & Bob Gibbons

Authors' note:

We apologise for any factual errors within the text. With so many different local interpretations of the culture we have seen, it is hard to discern the truth among the legends and tales passed down over generations. It is likely that some explanations may vary, according to the source from which they came. Please do let us know if you discover any more hidden gems within the valley which we should include in future editions. Changes can and will occur, so check information about such things as visas, transport, accommodation and food locally. Sketch maps have ill-defined international borders.

Warning

Please remember that the region encompassing the Kailash greater region is wild and very different from a western environment. Levels of hygiene are not as high as in most more developed countries.

The authors can accept no liability for damage of any nature (including damage to property, personal injury or death) arising from the information in this book, directly or indirectly. Although there are now many local mobile phone networks throughout most (but definitely not all) of the region, foreign mobile phones may not work. Take a supply of all the medicines you are likely to use, as well as those you do not expect to need! Beware of grungy dogs in the quieter back alleys.

> The greater danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.
> **Michelangelo**

Yaks grazing near Paryang

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Rama Tiwari for choosing us to write the first edition of this book in 2004, and, in turn, inspiring us to explore such indescribably beautiful geographical settings and to delve into the historical, artistic and cultural realms of the Kailash Guge region. Thanks to Ashish, Lala, Rhicha, Sunil, Arjun and the ever-patient staff of Pilgrims, who helped us to seek out the necessary information among the crowded bookshelves of the Pilgrims shops.

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In Shimla thanks to the Band Box travel agency.

And finally, to Christopher Burchett and the staff of Pilgrims in Varanasi, thanks for working flat-out – the only position to be in, in the sweltering heat of north India!

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Rama (Tiwari) and Siân at the old Kathmandu Pilgrims office

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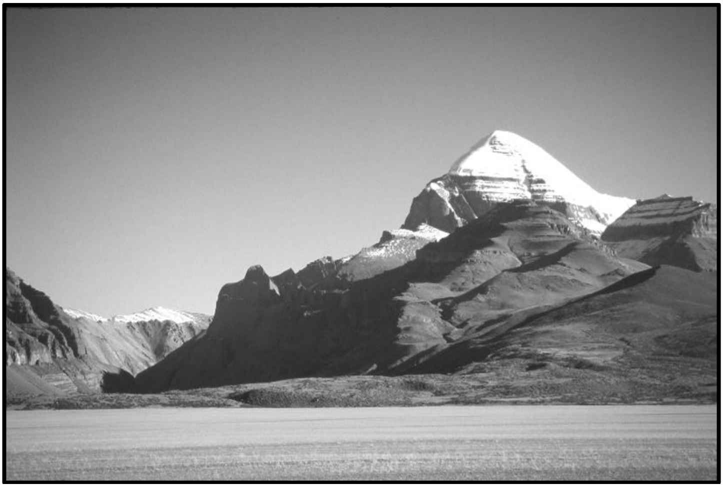
Chortens at Yeshe O Temple in Toling

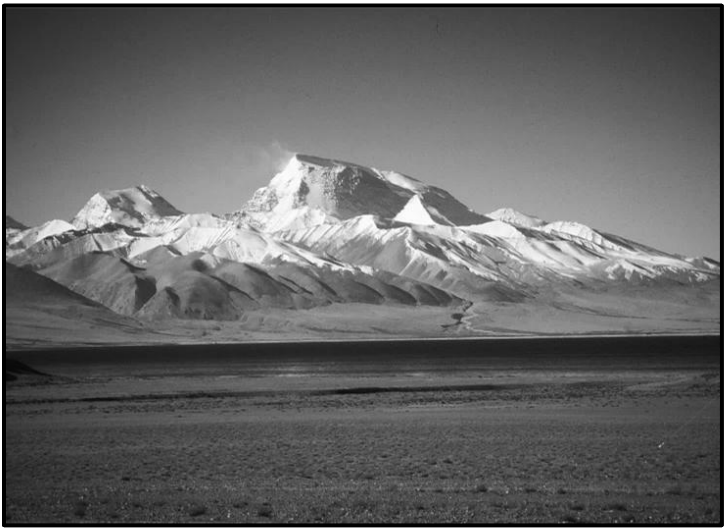
Highlights



Kailash and the western valley of the Kora trek

Yeshe O monastery, Toling

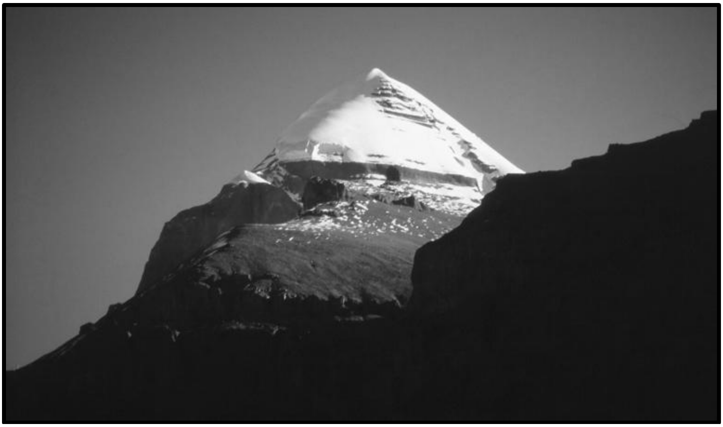
Lake Manasarovar



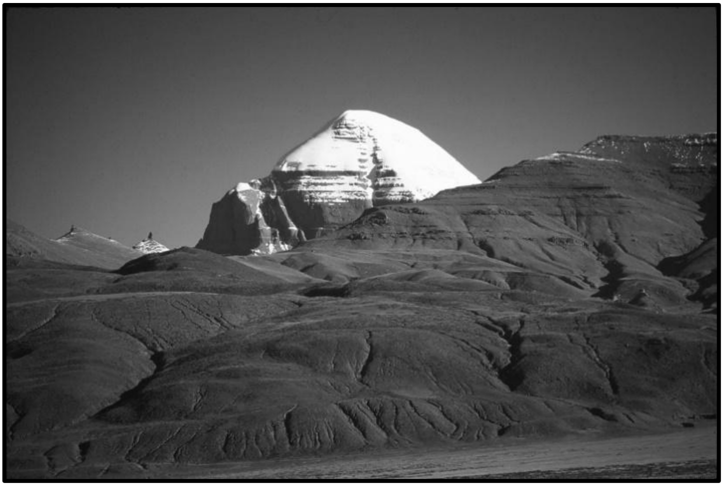
Gurla Mandhata peak south of Darchen

Himalayan panorama of the India and West Nepal peaks

Nanda Devi, Indian Himalaya from south of Kailash



Kailash from the Lha Chu Valley



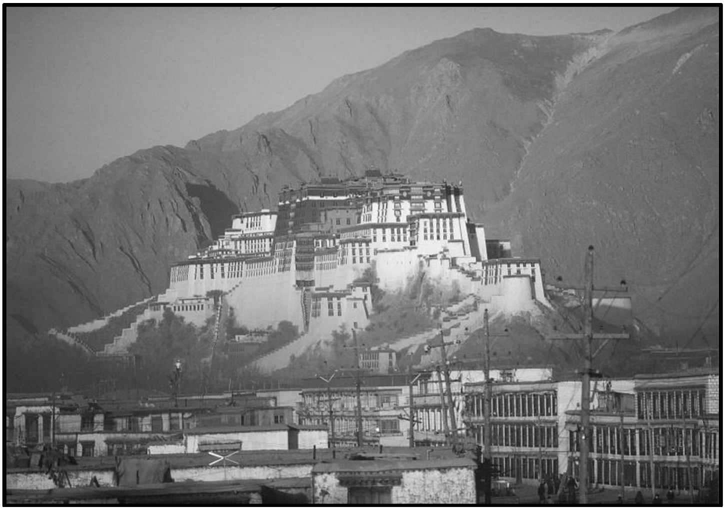
Mount Kailash South Face from the ridge above Darchen

Bob approaching Driraphuk

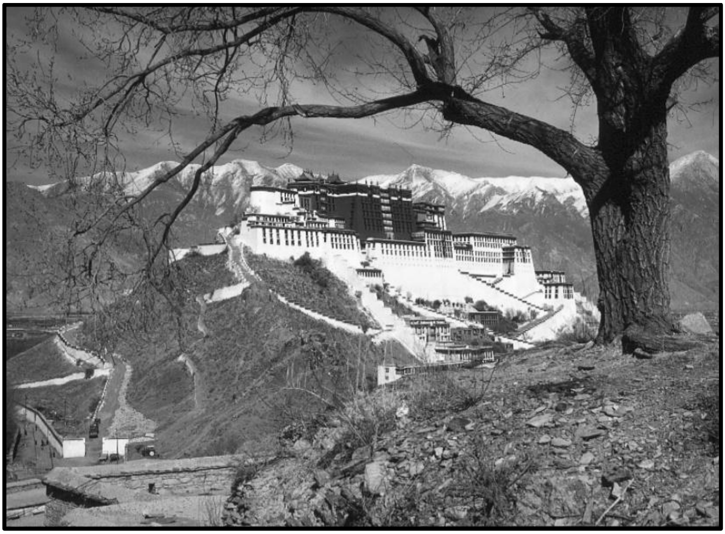
Siân on the Drolma La Pass at 5660m

Xixapangma and the Nepal Himalaya from above Lalung La

Kamet peak (left) from ruins above Toling on the pass



From any viewpoint, the Potala dominates Lhasa

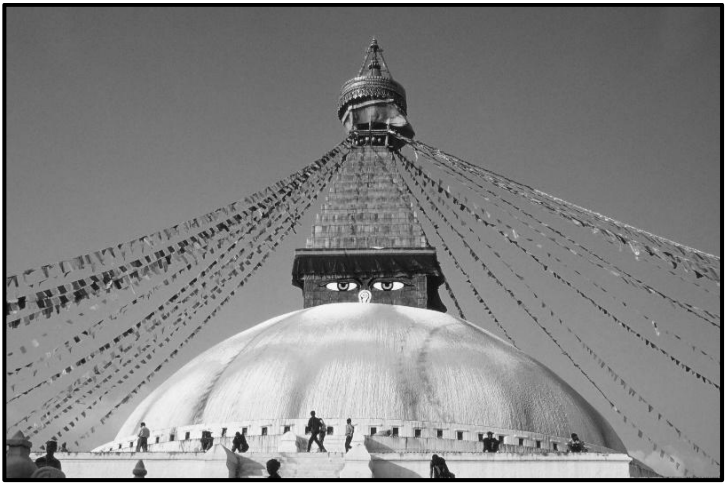


The Potala from Chogpori Hill before the rapid development of the city

The holiest pilgrimage site in Lhasa is the Jokhang Temple

Tibetan pilgrims circle the Barkhor streets in old Lhasa

The road to Kailash

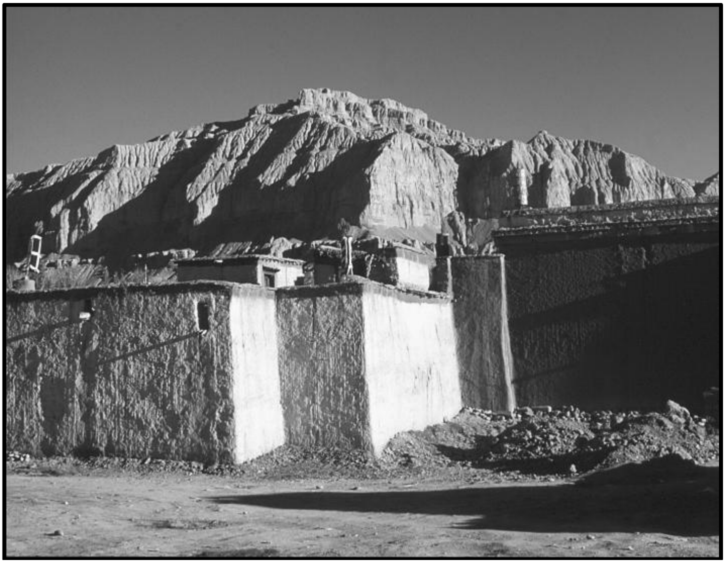


North of Dhaulagiri

Prayer flags approaching Kailash

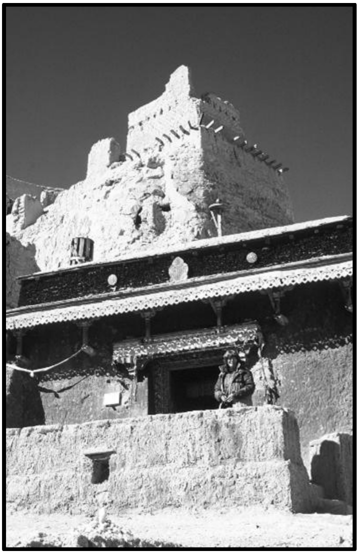
Kailash from the southeast

Temples and shrines

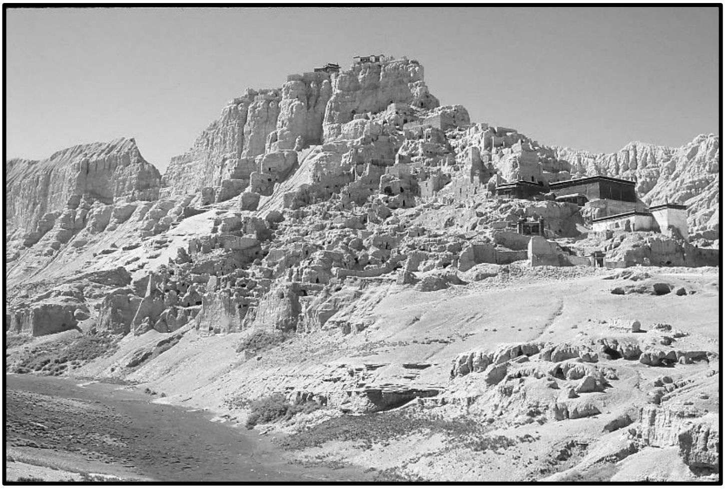


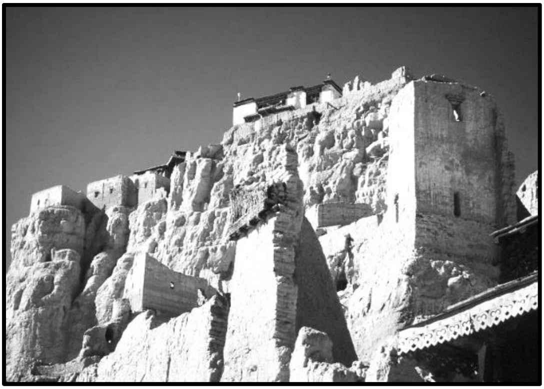
Toling: the ‘lost’ ruins of the Yamantaka chapel

Toling: White Lhakhang



Tsaparang: Red Lhakhang

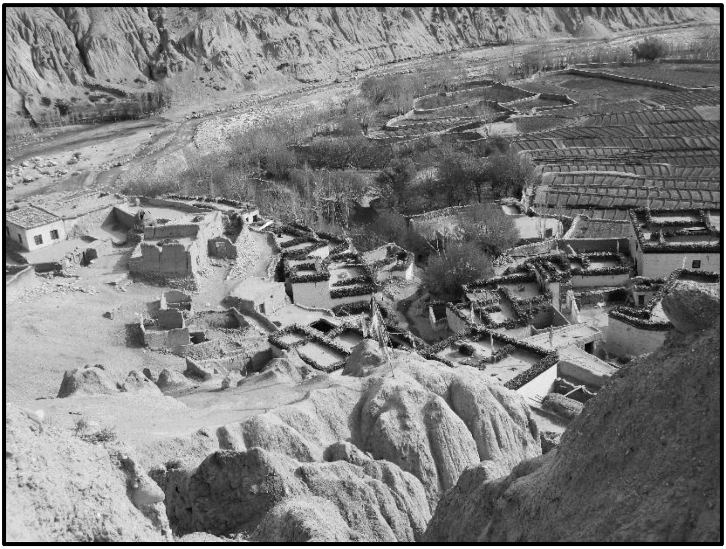




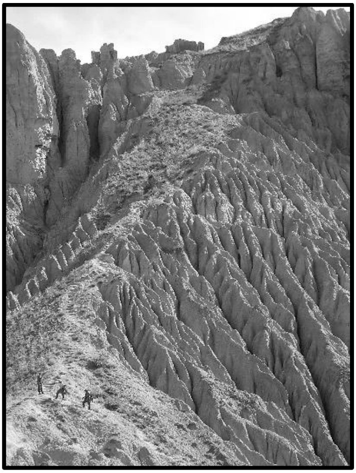
Views of Tsaparang citadel

Other areas linked to Guge – Mustang

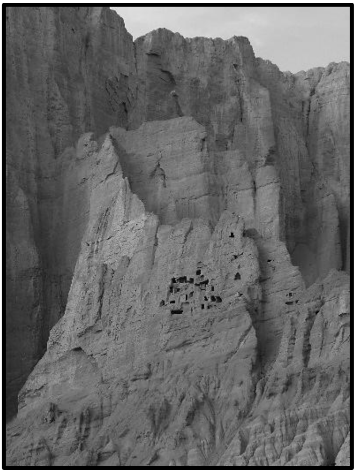
Lo Manthang gathering



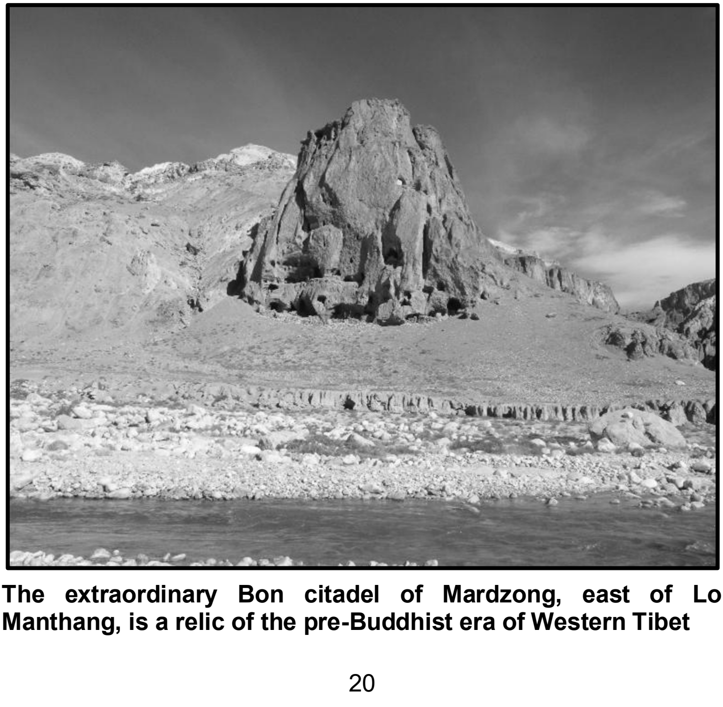
Eastern trail to Dhi



Konchok Ling is a cave retreat northeast of Lo Manthang with an amazing access trail

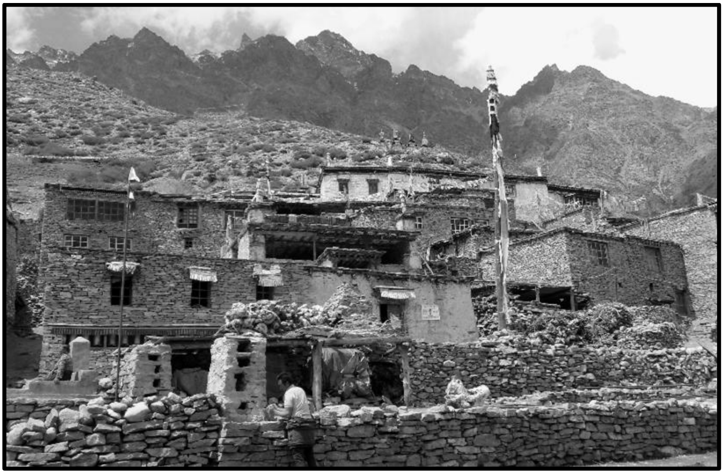


Bon and Buddhist pilgrims used many cave retreats for meditation, like Drakmar



The extraordinary Bon citadel of Mardzong, east of Lo Manthang, is a relic of the pre-Buddhist era of Western Tibet

West Nepal

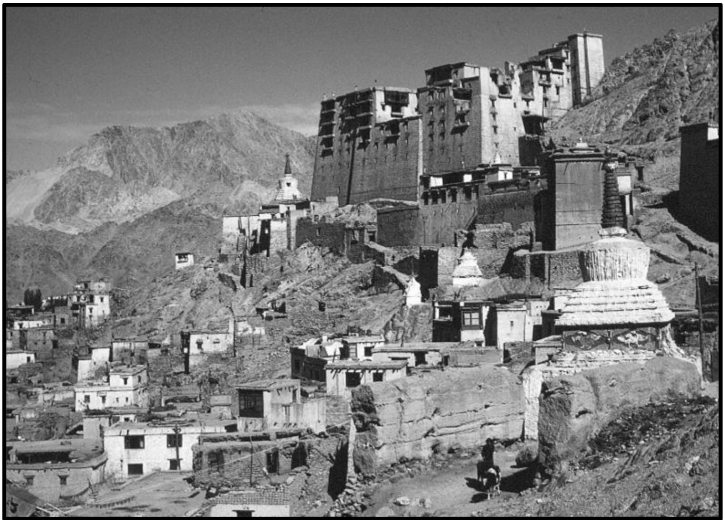


Jang Monastery
Limi Valley,
West Nepal

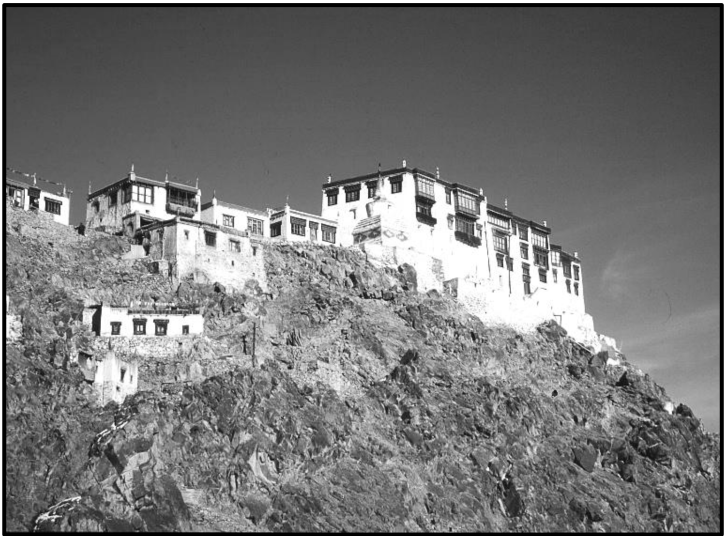
Wild canyons
Limi Valley

Crossing
Nyalu La

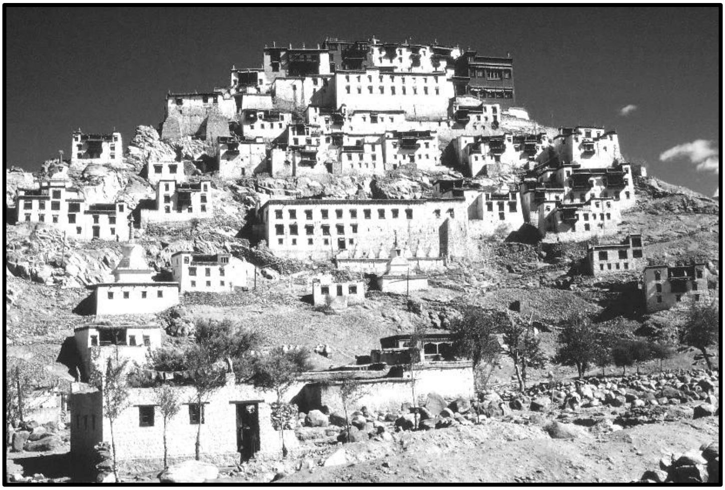
Ladakh and Spiti



View of Leh and the palace



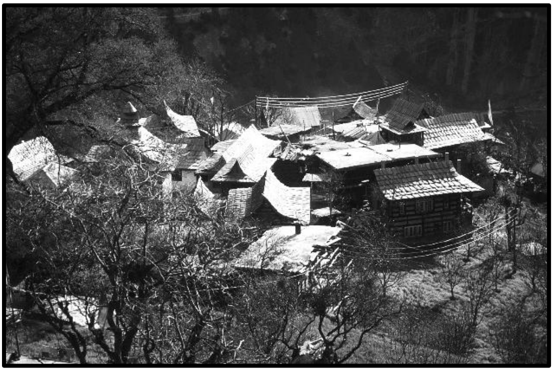
Stakna Monastery has links to the Drukpa sect and Bhutan



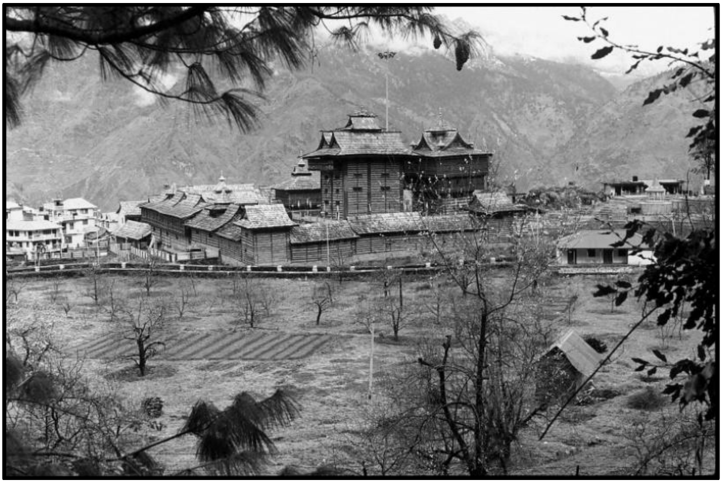
Thikse Monastery, Ladakh

Pangong Lake. Eastern Ladakh

Scary stages on the road to Spiti



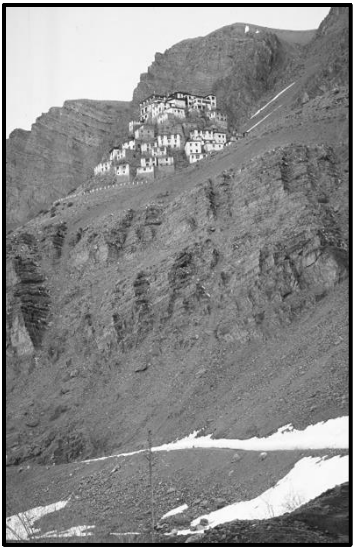
Lower area of Rekong Peo en route to Spiti



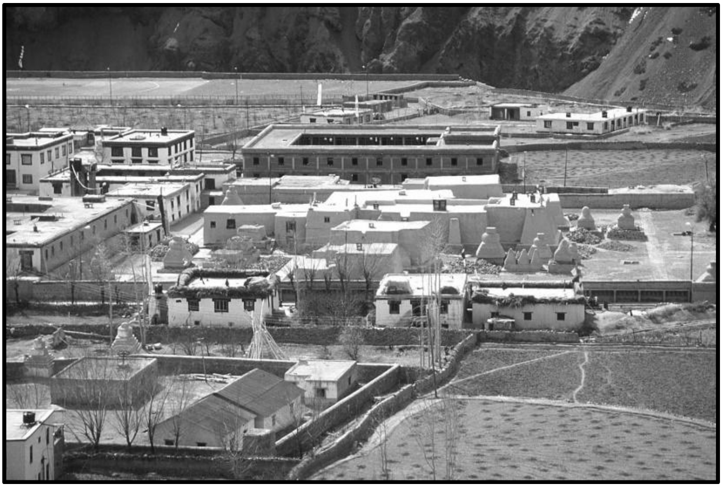
Bhimakali temple at Sarahan

The wild and scary highway from Shimla to Spiti runs along the Tibetan border, below the peak of Leo Pugyal along the Spiti River to Dhankar and Kaza

Before Tabo the road crosses eroded gullies and canyons



The picture-postcard monastery of Ki is a highlight

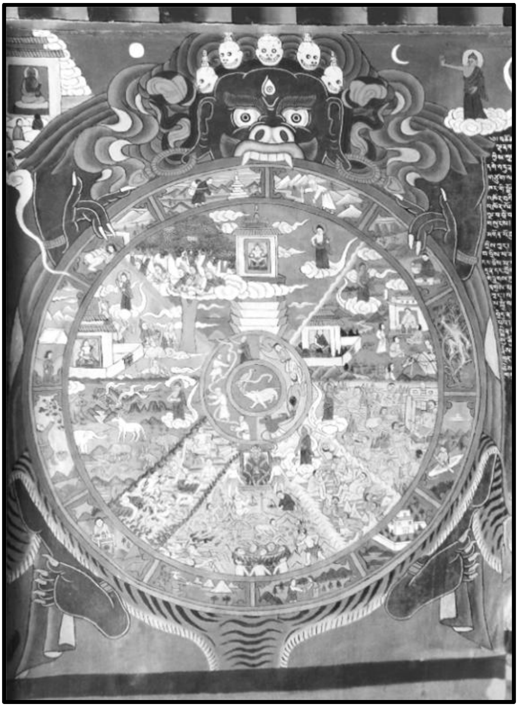


Top: Dhankar village

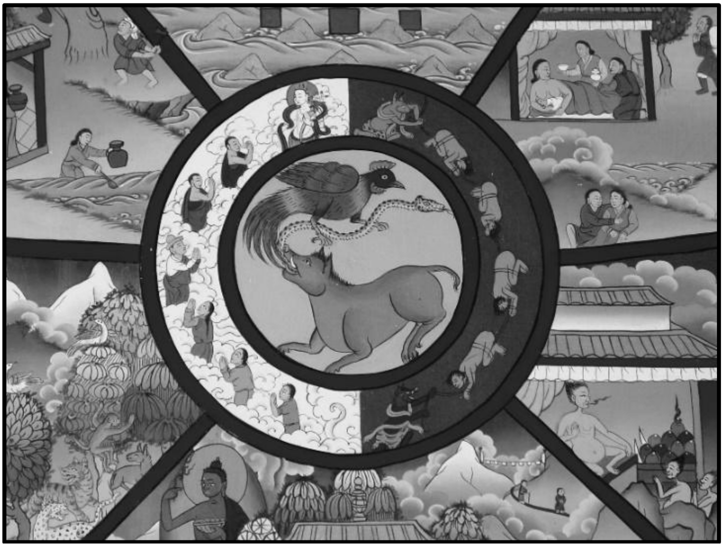
Centre: View of Tabo

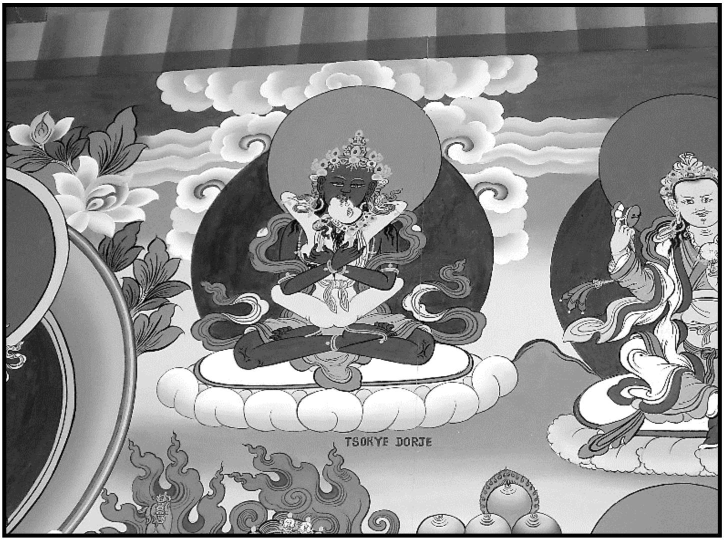
Left: Tabo monastery

Cultural aspects

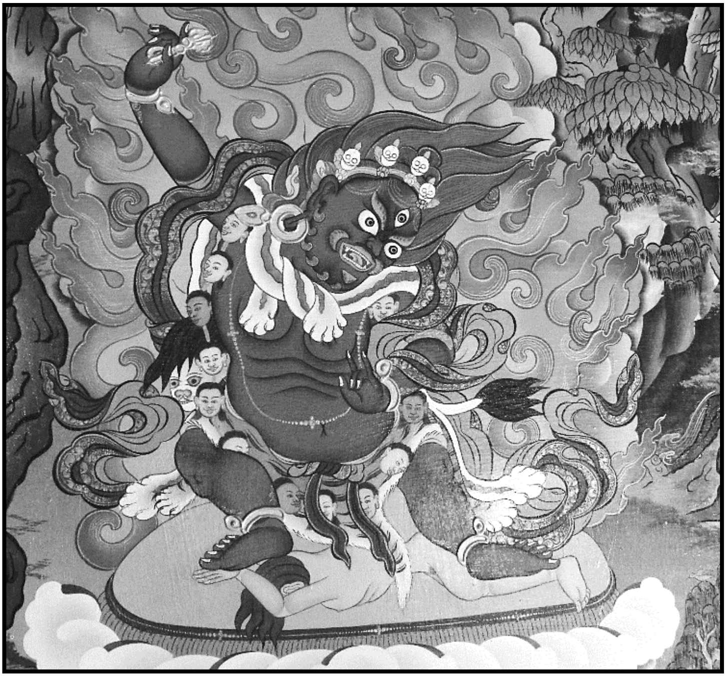


The Buddhist Wheel of Life is displayed in monasteries

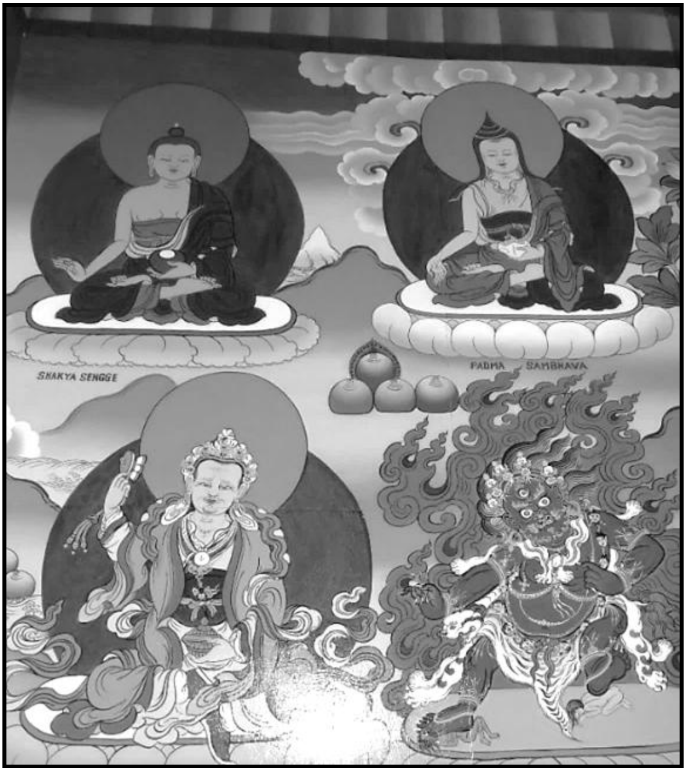



TSOKYE DORJE

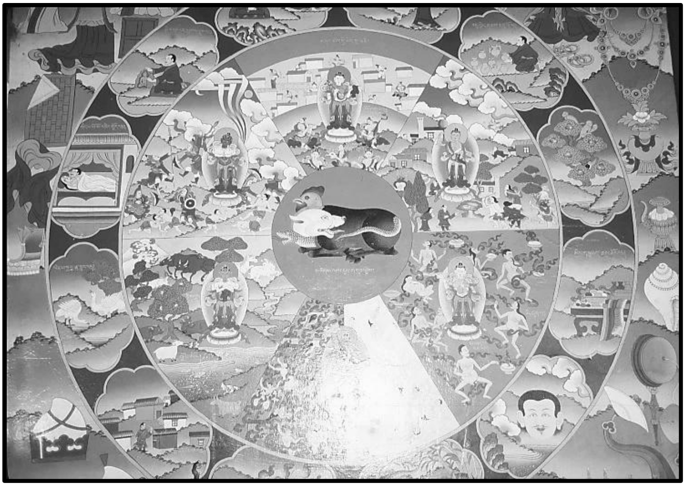
Typical Buddhist Yab-Yum image



Vajrapani icon

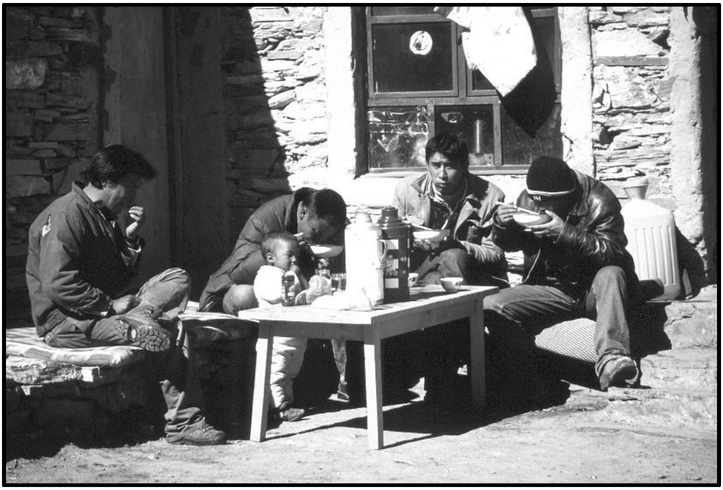

SHAKYA SENGGE
PADMA SAMBHAVA

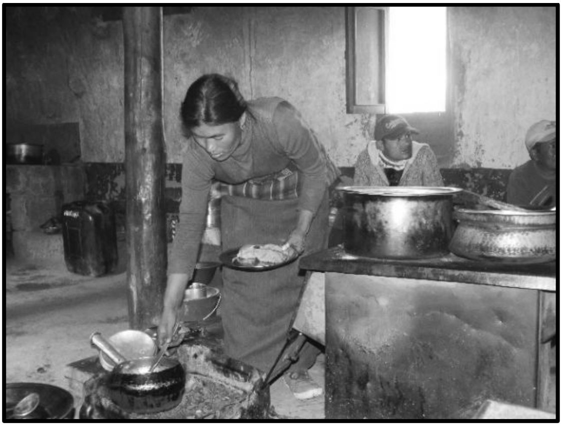
Typical Monastery images



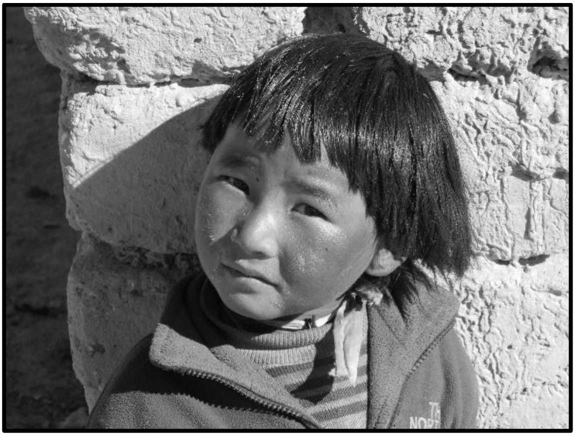
The Bon Wheel of Life with different centre

Meeting the people

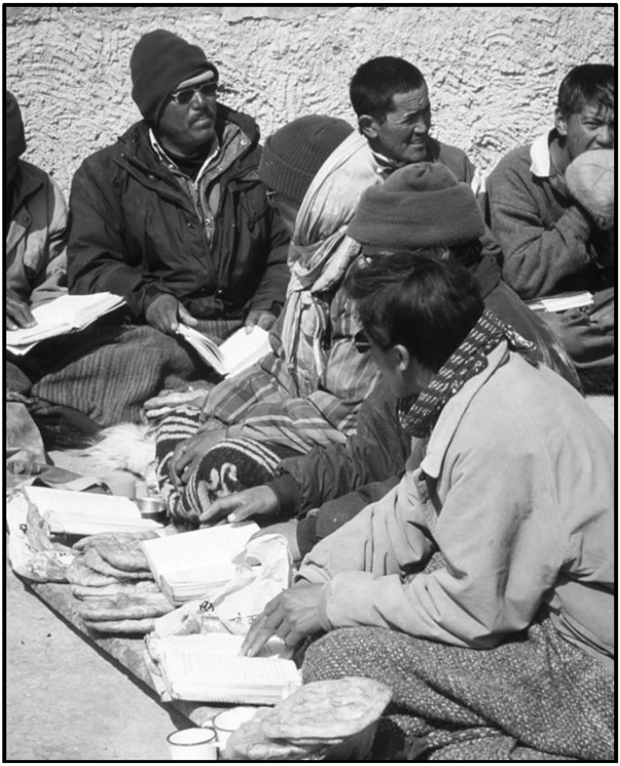




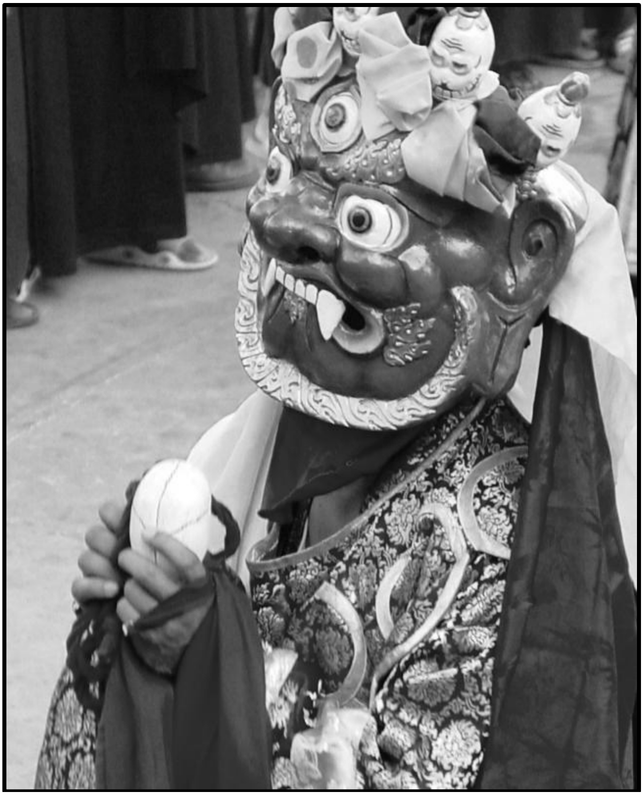
People of Tibet and Mustang



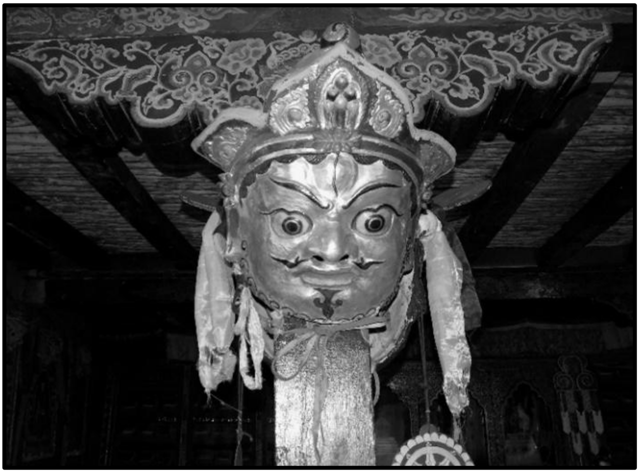
Ladies of Kalpa, Rekong Peo en route to Spiti



Festival in Kibber, Spiti



Masked dancer at the Triten Norbutse Bon monastery

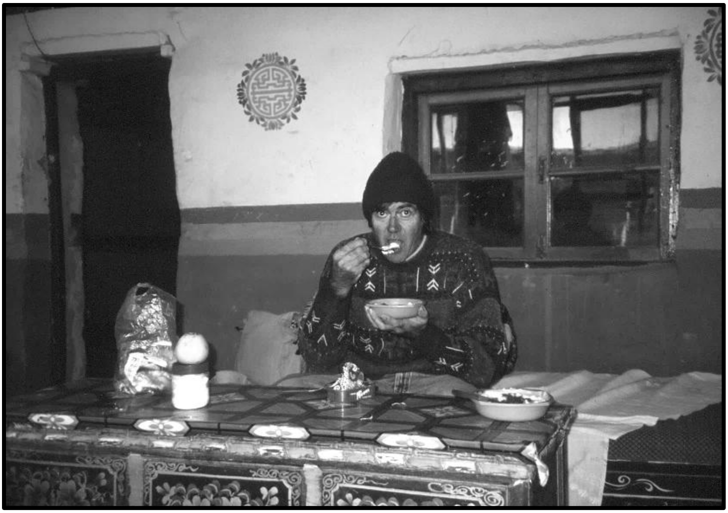


Cham dance mask, Limi Valley

The serene face of Maitreya Buddha in Thikse Monastery near Leh in Ladakh

Maitreya is the Buddha of the Future; perhaps his wisdom will prevail after the Dark Ages of Kali!

Below: No one said getting to Kailash and Guge would be easy or comfortable – bring your own supplies!



Warning
Please remember that walking in remote, high mountain areas is potentially dangerous. The publisher and authors have taken every care in producing this guide, but readers must take ultimate responsibility for themselves. Trail and weather conditions can change suddenly and readers must understand these natural risks. Trails and roads in the Himalaya are sometimes exposed and narrow, and unsuitable for anyone who does not have a good head for heights. Those who are unsure or inexperienced should relish the additional safety of employing a fully trained and experienced trekking guides.

Neither Map House nor the authors can accept liability for damage of any nature (including damage to property, personal injury or death) arising from the information in this book, directly or indirectly.

There are few good health posts in the region. Take a supply of all the medicines you are likely to use, as well as those you do not expect to need! Apart from the major towns, banks are non-existent, so take more local cash than you need, and then a bit more. In other words, be prepared to help yourself in any eventuality. It may be the only way.

> It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step on to the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.
> ***The Lord of the Rings*, J R R Tolkien**

The road after a snowstorm

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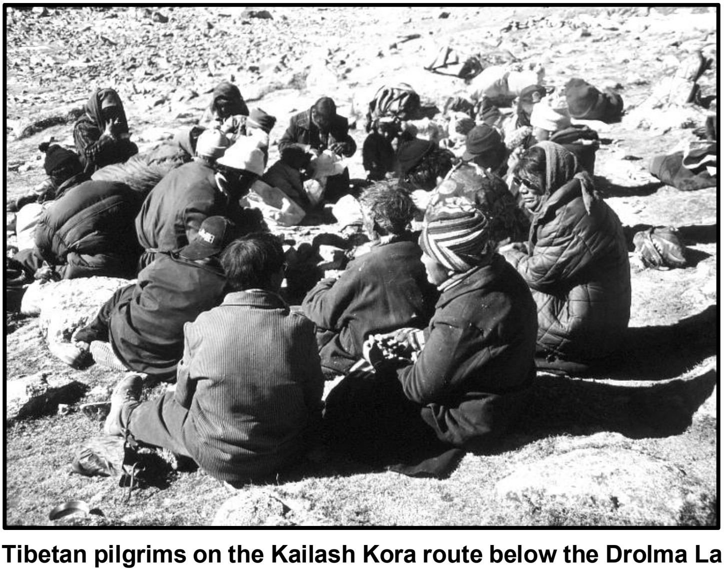


Tibetan pilgrims on the Kailash Kora route below the Drolma La

Preface

> Holy places never had any beginning. They have been holy from the time they were discovered, strongly alive because of the invisible presence breathing through them. Man is amazed or fearful as he feels the vibrations of invisible power in the air…
> ***Tibet: The Land of Snows*, Giuseppe Tucci**

We've spent much of our lives in the mountains of the world, in particular the Alps and the Himalaya of Nepal, as well as the endless empty spaces of the Sahara Desert in Africa. All these vast places have a special spiritual attraction, making one feel tiny and insignificant in comparison with the greater forces of nature. The greater sphere of western Tibet is another place of inspiration and perhaps home to the most mysterious mountain of them all, Mt. Kailash.

Lands of the Tantric Mountain is a book about the ancient region in Western Tibet known as Shangshung, and beyond, to parts of Spiti, Kinnaur, Zanskar, Ladakh, Mustang and West Nepal. Although Shangshung no longer constitutes a geographical entity, it lives on in spirit in the shadow of Mount Kailash. Ancient Shangshung later encompassed the Guge Kingdom, which also spread across the Himalaya into north India and the fringes of Nepal. Here the tumultuous waters of the River Sutlej carved a way through the great mountain range. Tenuously linked to Tibet by high passes, the high windswept valleys of the high Himalaya remained culturally attached to the Guge capital of Tsaparang and the monastic centre of Toling until the 17th century.

Tantra was introduced to Tibet in the 8th century by Padma Sambhava. It was integrated into Tibetan Buddhism and was later encompassed by the different sects to varying degrees. Padma Sambhava (Guru Rinpoche) meditated in many places, including a cave in the western valley of Kailash, and his influence remains strong in Tibet. The Tibetan culture of the 11th century reached from Ladakh to Spiti, West Nepal and Mustang. At the time, Buddhism in various forms stretched from central Afghanistan across the northern Himalaya to Bhutan and the Far East.

Before Buddhism gained a foothold in Tibet, another equally mysterious faith, Bon or Bonpo, was observed by the people. The Bon also practised forms of shamanism and demonic cult worship. Some scholars believe that Tantra predates Hindu and Buddhist ideas, and is descended from more ancient mediaeval cults involving worship of the mother goddesses.

Whether Tantra predates Bon has never been established. In these pages we explore aspects of Mount Kailash and the Valley of the Khyung, which is central to the culture of the Bon and the lost Kingdom of Guge, whose riches have been slowly absorbed by the elements. The whole of the Tibetan plateau region has a sacred feel to it; the people are deeply religious and indeed the powers of nature here are so overwhelming that one cannot fail to be moved.

This book is an introductory cultural guide to the vast mystical region of western Tibet at the foot of the sacred mountain – the Tantric lands of Kailash. It is basically divided into four parts, the Kailash region itself, greater Guge in Tibet and the peripheral areas – Limi and Mustang in Nepal, Spiti, Kinnaur and Ladakh. Also included is some practical information covering the cultural regions of 'greater' Kailash and Guge, with brief details on some of the trekking access.

Siân Pritchard-Jones & Bob Gibbons
Kathmandu 2026

> In the dust-filled valleys and low plains of our daily existence we have forgotten our connections with stars and suns; and therefore we need the presence of these mighty signposts and milestones to shake us up and arouse us from the slumber of self-complacency.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

This 2026 edition

Having first visited Tibet in February 1985, and most recently in December 2025, we have seen many changes. Massive changes have occurred to the transportation infrastructure and general modernisation of housing. Lhasa has grown rapidly, with ever more Han Chinese migrating from the east. A modern railway links Tibet to Qinghai and is extending west through Xigatse towards Nepal (in theory at least for now). The people in the countryside of Tibet have not changed so much, and neither have the toilets!

Across Spiti and Ladakh, roads get better and so does the tourism infrastructure. The eastern areas of Ladakh bordering Tibet are open to travellers, with amazing scenery and superb historic sights culturally connected to Guge. Within a stone's throw of Mount Kailash, the ancient unmolested monasteries, culture and traditions of greater Guge can be experienced by those willing to undertake hard treks in Ladakh, Mustang and the Limi Valley of West Nepal. Routes now link Limi to Taklakot (just south of Gurla Mandhata) and Darchen, Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash. Outline trekking notes are included for those seeking out the sublime unknowns of the region.

Introduction

> Even amongst the mightiest (mountains) there are some of such outstanding character and position that they become symbols of the highest aspirations of humanity, as expressed in ancient civilisations and religions, milestones of the eternal quest for perfection and ultimate realisation, signposts that point beyond our earthly concerns towards the infinity of a universe from which we have originated and to which we belong**.**
>
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

Western Tibet is a remote and harsh land, hemmed in by the world's highest mountains and cut off from other civilisations over the centuries by equally barren and inhospitable lands to the north and east. Bordering on Ladakh in the west, where range after range of rugged peaks block the way, Western Tibet has gained a reputation as a lost world, a hidden Shangri-La, a land of mystery. In aiming to unlock a door into this forbidding region, we journey across high plains, over passes that reach for the sky, and plunge down into unfathomable, unbelievable canyons, in search of this lost world of old Shangshung. This is a cultural journey to Kailash and Guge, into the Lands of the Tantric Mountain.

Kailash is a mysterious and mythical mountain. Its exact location remained a mystery for centuries, for it lay hidden and isolated behind the virtually impenetrable barrier of the Himalaya. Kailash is famed as the centre of the universe; by others it is considered the navel of the earth, or a resting place for the gods. For more than a thousand years it has been a pilgrimage place for many of the world's major religions, and for these pilgrims, it is considered to be the spiritual centre of the universe.

Lying just northwest of the West Nepal, Indian and Tibetan border, Mount Kailash is 6,714m (22,028ft) high. Shiva, the god of destruction, sits on its icy summit, making it sacred to Hindus. As Kang Rinpoche, Buddhists revere it as 'the Jewel of the Snows'; like a vast chorten of nature. For Buddhists, the mountain can remove all sins of past and present lives. To the Jains, a smaller sect from India, Kailash is the sacred peak of Asthapada or Padma Harada. This is where the first Jain prophet or tirthankar, Adinath Rasbhanatha, first gained enlightenment. As Yungdrung Gutse, or the nine-storied Swastika Mountain, it is revered by the indigenous Bonpo, the first religious people of Tibet. Their beliefs have been much assimilated by Buddhism, yet the Bon faith still retains a considerable following. Their first spiritual guru, Tonpa Shenrab, is said to have come from heaven to earth by way of Kailash.

For the casual visitor, Kailash is a mountain to seek out for its unashamed beauty and entrancing vistas. It is a place of inspirational beauty, one of the wonders of the world. The adventurous traveller or trekker will be captivated by its magnificence. No one can fail to be enthralled by its majestic countenance. A visit to Mount Kailash will incite sheer excitement into the spirit. The thin high-altitude air will take one’s breath away, making each upward step a huge effort. The buttresses of Kailash will lure and overwhelm its cast of pilgrims and hikers. Even the most unbelieving, atheistic of souls may find solace below its peak for a few short days. The grandeur of nature is never hidden for long from those who venture on to the Tibetan plateau, the land of the snows.

The Kingdom of Guge, west of Kailash, is an equally astonishing region, where nature has carved her ultimate fairyland. The canyons and valleys of the upper Sutlej cannot be imagined, for it is an arid wasteland of gullies, pinnacles, crenelated sandstone spires and deep impenetrable crevasses in mud/stone conglomerates. It is a geographer’s paradise, a Shangri-La for explorers and adventurers, and it holds the some of the world’s most remarkable religious artwork. Barely accessible even to this day, it is not surprising that few outsiders have cast their eyes over this unworldly landscape. But Guge was not confined to Tibet; it extended to an equally remote part of India and even briefly into Mustang and the Limi Valley of north-western Nepal.

Today, with the opening of the India-Tibet highway along the River Sutlej from Shimla, it is just possible to access the western reaches of the former Guge Kingdom in Spiti. The monasteries of Spiti and Tibet share a common theme; on each side of the border the great artwork of Guge can be seen. In Spiti, Tabo monastery hosts paintings the equal of Toling and Tsaparang. To the north, Ladakh too has its remnants of the same dynamic artistry at Alchi. Most of modern-day Ladakh was influenced heavily by Western Tibet, including the remote eastern areas adjacent to the current border around Lake Pangong.

What is the common thread that links these great seats of Buddhist culture and learning?

Unlocking the secrets and spells of the Lands of the Tantric Mountain has fascinated adventurers, missionaries and even spies for centuries. Exploring these remote regions is incredibly difficult, arduous and uncomfortable, but incredibly rewarding.

It gets ever harder in a modern world to discover those almost lost places over the horizon, aptly called Shangri La.

CHAPTER ONE

Country background

> One can understand why this people lives so intensely in its religion, almost entranced and lost in visions unknown to us. The landscape is the natural background for Lamaism, for its rites, for its demons; all is gigantic and mysterious, infinite and sad.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Geography

Tibet is a high, mountainous land. On the south it is bounded by the greatest peaks in the world, the Himalaya, stretching for thousands of kilometres from east to west. To the north of this supreme example of nature's grandeur is a high plateau, at an altitude of mostly 4000m or more, extending northwards for many hundreds of kilometres until it drops off into mainland China. Many of the valleys are green and lush in summer, but white and barren in winter. Truly a high altitude desert, it impresses on the mind just how insignificant we human beings are in comparison with the massive forces of nature. The two lakes of Manasarovar and Rakhas Tal are flashes of blue and green on an otherwise colourless canvas.

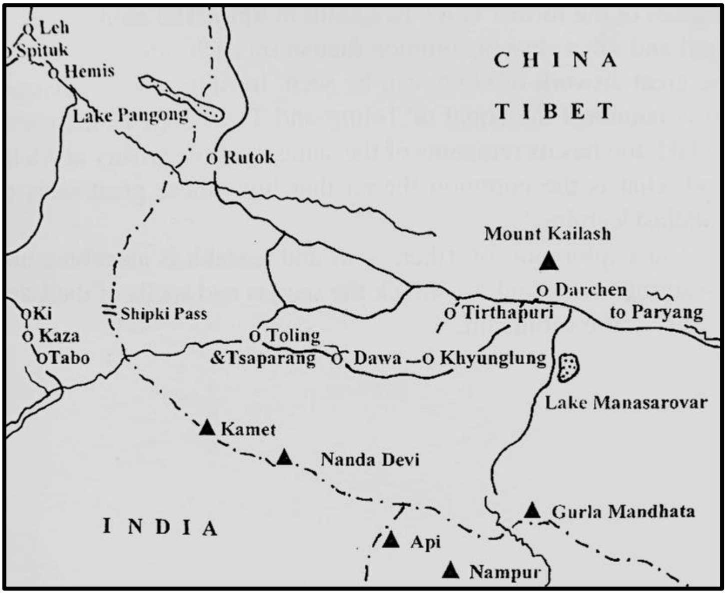
Tibet is another world, beyond the wildest dreams of most people who have not had the chance to experience its exquisite and excruciating grandeur. From baking hot sunshine during the day, temperatures can drop to -40°C at night or even lower, chilling the spirit as well as the bone. But then the next morning a clear blue sky dispels all bad feelings; the sun warms the spirit as well as the body.

Midday temperatures in the summer sun can be warm enough for a tee-shirt, though in the shade the temperatures are much lower. Even in winter the power of the sun is deceptively strong and liable to burn delicate human skin. As well as its intense cold, Tibet is also extremely dry, and its freezing dry air will parch the skin of anyone who goes out in it unprotected.

Because of its extremely harsh climate, very little food grows in Tibet, and most has to be imported from the rest of China. For much of the year, road access to Tibet is cut off by snow and the only access is by air from Chengdu, in a dramatic flight over some of the most beautiful mountains on earth.

Those on the left side of the aircraft may be lucky to glimpse the remote mountain of Namche Barwa, where the Tsangpo drops into uncharted gorges before emerging as the Brahmaputra in India and Bangladesh.

Map of Spiti, Ladakh and Western Tibet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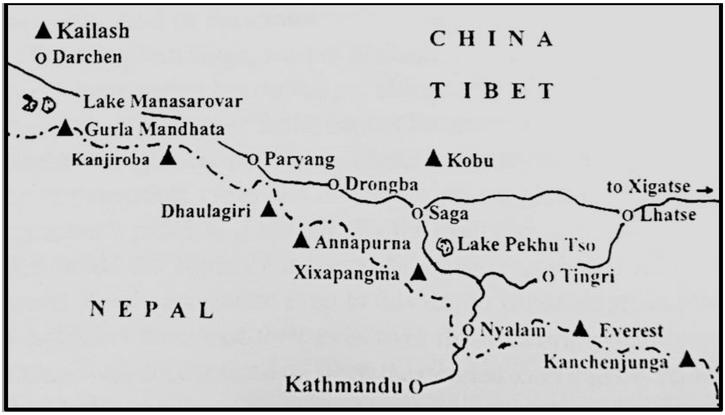
Route map of Kathmandu to Kailash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Annapurna
Lake Pekhu Tso
Xixapangma
Tingri
NEPAL
Nyalam
Everest
Kanchenjunga
Kathmandu

Geological events

An ancient Tibetan legend delves into the origins of the high plateau and it also makes claims that Tibet was once under the sea. Perhaps these myths were influenced by the fact that fossils are common in Tibet.

The theory of plate tectonics has long been accepted as the principle reason why mountains have formed. According to this idea, huge surface plates ‘float’ on a mobile magma base and shift around over millions of years. The Himalaya and the Tibetan plateau were formed when the two plates of India and Tibet collided.

Previously the area between these plates comprised the Tethys Sea. From the abundant fossil records in Tibet and Nepal, it is estimated that this sea existed some 100 million years ago. Sometime in the next 50 million years, India began to run into Tibet and the first mountains were formed.

These ranges are now the Kangtise, the Nyenchentangla north of Lhasa, and the Kunlun, which form the northern rim of the plateau. Mount Kailash probably existed as much as 50 million years ago.

Some 40 to 45 million years ago, the Indian plate continued its northward march, forcing the plateau upwards. It currently folds under the Tibetan plate along the foothills of the Siwalik range that runs along the edge of the plains.

Around 20 million years ago, the Himalaya were formed. The plateau region has risen further over the last 2 million years, as have the Himalaya.

Location of Kailash and Guge

> We are looking upon the inexhaustibly rich rock formations. We note where and how were conceived the examples of symbolic images. Nature, having no outlet, inscribed epics with their wealth of ornamentation, on the rocks. One perceives how the forms of imagery blend with the mountain atmosphere.
> ***Altai Himalaya*, Nicholas Roerich**

The western region of modern-day Tibet, known as Ngari, has boundaries that coincide in part with the ancient land of Shangshung. This almost mystical region had as its focal point Mount Yungdrung Gutse, the Bon name for Kailash, and its central monastery was at located at Khyunglung, some 100km southwest of Kailash.

The peak of Mount Kailash is located in western Tibet, roughly 900km west of Lhasa, and over 700km northwest of Kathmandu. The nearest large settlement is Ali, also known as Xiquanhe by the Chinese.

Mount Kailash is situated north of the main Himalayan chain. These mountains delineate the international border between Tibet, Nepal and India. The summit of Kailash is located in the range north of the main Himalayan arc, known as the Kangtise range. This mountain range is the true watershed of the Tibetan plateau. From the base of Mount Kailash and the Kangtise range emanate four of the main rivers of Asia. These are the Indus, the Tsangpo (later to become the Brahmaputra), the Sutlej and the Karnali, which leads to the Ganges.

These rivers, which are the lifeblood of India and Tibet itself, have been accorded great status in Tibetan mythology. Each river is said to issue from the mouth of a different animal.

The Tibetans have named the rivers as follows: The horse's mouth river, the Tamchok Khambab, heads east and is the Tsangpo. The lion's mouth river, the Senge Khambab, issues to the north and is the Indus. The peacock's mouth, the Mapchu Khambab, is the river of the south, the Karnali of Nepal. The mouth of an elephant river, the Langchan Khambab, heads west, being the Sutlej of Himachal Pradesh and the Punjab.

Sutlej River Valley near Tsaparang

Extending across the Himalayan divide into India, the historical boundaries of the Tibetan Guge Kingdom include the regions of Spiti and Kinnaur. The Kingdom of Guge is fabled for its extraordinary landscape. It is located a day's drive northwest of Mount Kailash and lies in the upper basin of the Sutlej River, before its tortuous descent to the plains of northern India.

The place is quite remarkable, for it is characterised by incredulously eroded sandstone and mud deposits. Dominating the valleys are weirdly shaped pinnacles and towers with gullies, whose ancient soft layers have been crafted by nature. The result is a fairytale landscape, an unworldly picture that bewitches the senses. It is within the confines of this region that the myriad of lost, mystic, mud castles, monasteries, fortresses and troglodyte caves of Guge have been hidden, camouflaged by nature.

The incredible landscapes of Guge – looking south towards Kamet peak and the Himalaya of India from high above Toling

Flora and fauna

Plants

Apart from the hardy grasses of the high plateau of Tibet, west of Xigatse few shrubs, bushes and trees are to be found. In sheltered areas, stunted juniper and berberis are found. Poplar trees and willow are rare, but do exist, for example in sheltered spots like in Toling. In Ladakh there tend to be more trees in sheltered canyons and along the Indus. In Spiti a few groves can be found here and there.

Birds

Not many birds are seen on the high plateau, though a variety of vultures may occasionally be spotted hovering overheard, waiting for the next dead sheep, yak or sky burial. Ducks, bar-headed geese and teal can be found around the lakes. The Chakor is another large bird found in the region.

Animals

The most common animal found is the yak, and derivatives of it like *dzos*, a cross between a yak and a cow. The milk smells slightly odd, but is thick and creamy, and makes excellent cheese and yoghurt. Most yaks are domesticated, though a few wild ones still exist.

Nomads have flocks of domesticated sheep and goats, as well as their yaks. See People of Tibet.

Wild animals are not plentiful in number or variety, because of the harsh environment. Nevertheless, you are likely to see herds of deer or *khyang* racing alongside your vehicle, or little *pica* rodents scurrying into their burrows in the ground as they see you approaching. Mountain deer, antelope and gazelle are fleet of foot and can travel at high speed, sometimes even as fast as a 4x4 car on the rough Tibetan roads.

The wild ass, the khyang, carries its head proudly arched like a zebra; a long black line stretching from its head to its tail. Reddish brown on top, it is white or grey underneath, and, although it looks quite like a donkey, it is never domesticated. Markor are wild goats, sometimes as large as a stag, with a reddish brown colour. These are rare. Another wild goat, the light brown *shyin*, is more commonly found in Ladakh. The brown bear is found in lower forests, but not around Kailash. Blue sheep (*bharal*), fox and snow wolf also live in the region.

Khyang on the plateau

The snow leopard is a very elusive animal, rarely encountered and virtually never photographed. Television crews with big budgets have waited years to get any film of these beautiful creatures. As for the yeti, it remains even more elusive than the snow leopard!

CHAPTER TWO

History of Tibet

The history of Tibet is a complex blend of historical fact and religion, both of which are intricately woven into the fabric of its society. By necessity these two aspects of the culture have to be considered as one. The origin of the Tibetan people lies partly in myth and partly in historical facts. They have most likely come from four original tribes; these were the Dong, Tong, Se and Mu from Shangshung.

Many of the earliest records of Tibet come from the ancient Bon, who inhabited the plateau region. According to legends, their ancestral homeland was just to the southwest of Mount Kailash, in a land called Shangshung. Evidence implies that Shangshung was centred on Khyunglung, where a monastery of the Bonpo still exists today. This region extended to the Kunlun Mountains, the Tarim basin and Ladakh in the northwest, and to India’s Kinnaur area in the south, where some similarities between their local writing scripts and Bon literature have been noted. It also extended to Central Tibet in the east, and as far as the central Changtang in the north, to Lake Dungra, where a mountain called Targo Ri is also sacred to the Bon. The region far to the east of Lhasa, in the shadows of Mounts Namche Barwa and Gyala Pelri, where the mysterious Tsangpo gorges are found, is also sacred to the Bon. Mount Bonri in the Kongpo region is a pilgrimage place for the Bon.

Long before the settlements of central Tibet were collectively joined under what is termed the Yarlung dynasty, from the 6th century onwards there existed the little-known Pugyel dynasty. Records of this period prior to Yarlung have been derived from ancient texts and legends. Nyatri Tsenpo was the founder of the Pugyel dynasty. It is said that there were 32 kings before the famous founder of Tibet, Srongtsen Gampo. This means, were it proven, that the history of Tibet could be traced back to about the 2nd or 3rd century BC. The 8th king of the Pugyel dynasty is said to be King Drigum, whose grave is, according to traditional legends, near Mount Bonri.

The accepted unification of Tibet took place in the mid-7th century, following some territorial expansion under Namri Srongtsen. In 642AD, when his son Srongtsen Gampo became king, further integration occurred. The king was fascinated by stories of a religion to the south and, long after its birth in Nepal and north India around 500BC, Buddhism began to develop in Tibet. Srongtsen Gampo’s conversion from a path of military expansionism to a benign leadership brought about the building of Buddhist temples throughout Tibet. He introduced many liberalising reforms and made Buddhism the state religion. He also famously acquired a Nepalese queen, Bhrikuti Devi, and a Chinese queen, Wengchen Kong Jo, both of whom were devout Buddhists. Following kings later introduced from India Sanskrit scriptures, which were translated into the Tibetan language.

Much of Tibet at that time continued neither to accept fully nor completely reject the new religion in favour of the old Bon. When natural disasters such as plagues engulfed the country, these were often blamed on the new ideas, as messages from the wrathful deities.

> Tibetans do not believe in those clear and precise limits which separate the physical world from the world of the spirit; imponderable bonds unite them.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

In the mid 8th century King Trisong Detsen came to the throne, and with him began a renewed interest in Buddhism. He brought the Indian Buddhist sage and teacher, Shantarakshita, to enlighten his subjects. The famous first monastery of Tibet at Samye was built under Shantarakshita in 762AD. At the behest of Shantarakshita, Trisong Detsen invited another Tantric master, Padma Sambhava, to come from India to help promote the religion, which at that time was the dominant belief in India. Padma Sambhava was later to be acknowledged as the founder of the first Buddhist sect, the Nyingma-pa, or old sect.

Although not now the predominant group, it is still found throughout Tibet. It has remained particularly strong among the famous Sherpa people of neighbouring Nepal, in the Khumbu region below Mount Everest. Padma Sambhava later became known in Tibet and in the Khumbu as Guru Rinpoche. The Sherpa people of Nepal, who kept their faith in the Nyingma-pa ideals, migrated across the Himalaya when other, more dominant, sects developed in Tibet. All across Tibet there are caves and meditation sites that are closely associated with Guru Rinpoche. King Trisong Detsen died in 797AD.

Another famous Tibetan leader was King Ralpachen. He further aided the cause of Buddhist development and gave the country some of its finest scriptures translated from Sanskrit. However, he also faced new challenges from the Bon and in 838AD was assassinated by his brother, Langdarma. The Bonpo re-established some control in the mid-9th century through King Langdarma, but just four years later he too was murdered. This is said to have occurred during a festival, when a dancing monk killed him with an arrow before disappearing into a crowd.

Throughout the following period there was considerable disorder, with little coherent government. There occurred a period of general immorality, sometimes blamed on the more liberal ideas of the Tantrics, a fact which helped in the demise of Buddhism in India before the Muslim conquerors.

Legend of Langdarma

In the mythology of both Bon and Buddhists, the character of King Langdarma is one of truly evil wickedness. This is one of the legends surrounding his death:

In mythology the people believed that King Langdarma had horns. Each day a young girl was summoned to comb his locks in such a way as to hide the horns. To keep the secret safe, each girl was then murdered. One day a beautiful young girl persuaded the king to let her go, on condition that she did not tell anyone else. But she could not keep the secret to herself and whispered the fact into a hole. Later some special grass grew here, called Tsa dam. The stem of the grass was used to make a trumpet, which when blown later rang out a message proclaiming, ‘the king has horns’.

Once the population knew that the king did have horns, reprisals followed against the Buddhists. During the Cham festivities, which involve masked dancers, a monk called Palgyi Dorje dressed in a black cloak and rode a white horse. He covered the horse in charcoal to make it black, and wore a black cloak with a white lining.

After he had killed Langdarma with his arrow, he escaped on his horse. To avoid being seen, he rushed into a river, where his black horse became white, and he turned his cloak inside out. And so he made his escape...

Founding of the Guge Kingdom

The founding of the Guge Kingdom, centred on Toling, began under one of Langdarma’s heirs, O Sung (Namde Wosung). The revival of Buddhism began in western Tibet in the 10th century under King Kord De, more commonly referred to as Lama Yeshe O. He was helped by his famous translator, Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055), whom he had sent to India to study.

Rinchen Zangpo is credited with establishing one hundred and eight monasteries, some being across the border in India. Toling and Tsaparang in Tibet, as well as Alchi and Tabo in India, are the more well known that survive today, with their fabulous Kashmiri/Nepali-inspired paintings.

Rinchen Zangpo

Famed throughout western Tibet, Guge, Spiti, Ladakh and Zanskar, Rinchen Zangpo is accredited with the founding of 108 monasteries across the region. He was probably born in the small settlement of Ranyi, on the Sutlej River close to the Shipki La pass in 958AD. Indian scholars suggest his family was from Lha Lung of the Lingti valley in the Spiti region. At the age of seventeen, Rinchen had a vision persuading him to go to Kashmir to study.

Accompanied by two student friends, he left Tibet in 975. He was introduced to many leading scholars and teachers in Kashmir. Rinchen Zangpo also met the famed teacher Naropa in Kashmir before continuing his educational studies in central India, possibly at Sanchi and Nalanda to the north. His ability to learn and master all the great texts and sutras led to his becoming the chief overseer of works to translate the Indian Buddhist canons. After thirteen years away from Tibet, he returned home in about 989AD.

Rinchen Zangpo's talents were increasingly recognised, and he soon found his way to Toling, the great monastic centre of Guge. In the ten years after 989 he began the construction of some of the 108 monastic centres for which he became famous. In 999, Yeshe O, the great lama of Toling, sent Rinchen Zangpo back to India with 21 students, to study Buddhism and bring back some Kashmiri artists. Unfortunately, only two survived the ordeal.

Lekpai Sherab was one of the survivors; the other was Rinchen Zangpo. Tibetans unaccustomed to the warm lower altitudes frequently have no resistance to malaria and other virulent disorders of the plains; yaks also die at lower altitudes. The preferred route to India, and very likely the route taken by these students, followed the easier pass of the Shipki La, west of Toling, thence into Spiti and along the Sutlej River. The route chosen by the Jesuit missionaries, the first foreign visitors, was the Mana Pass, an altogether more difficult route.

Rinchen Zangpo returned to Tibet around 1005AD and is said to have translated 161 texts in collaboration with his pupils and scholarly colleagues. Lekpai Sherab became the junior translator or lotsawa. When the Muslims invaded India, all the great Indian texts were lost, so it was fortuitous that the works remained in Tibet, safe from destruction. These Tibetan scriptures had to be translated back to Sanskrit later on to preserve the wealth of Buddhist literature. When Atisha came to Toling in 1038 he met Rinchen Zangpo, now given the title of the great translator or *lotsawa*. He particularly worked on the Tantras, even though his master Yeshe O is said to have had reservations as to the true validity of the texts.

The Tantras advocated a quicker personal way to enlightenment, whereas Atisha and his followers of the later Red Hat school preferred the meditation path, a slower approach. Rinchen himself is said to have worked on the Text of Truth of the Dhyani Buddhas, who include Vairocana, an almost cult deity of the time and very much in evidence in the great remains of this era at Tabo, Toling and Alchi in Ladakh. Rinchen Zangpo passed on in 1055AD, but in accordance with later Gelug-pa traditions, his lineage has continued as reincarnates.

For a list of monasteries built by Rinchen Zangpo, see page 260.

In order to further the cause of Buddhism, Yeshe O also invited another India master, Atisha (982–1054), to come to Tibet. Such was Yeshe O's devotion that, according to one legend, he gave up his life for the cause. Yeshe O was captured by raiders, but when his nephew had raised the ransom money for his release, he told him to use it instead to invite Atisha. Atisha came from Nalanda University in India to Toling in 1042. He spent three years in Toling monastery and, through his great knowledge of Buddhism and his compassionate teachings, succeeded in reviving Buddhism. He founded the Kadam-pa sect during his time in Tibet. Buddhism spread from western Tibet to encompass the whole country. Drontonpa (Dromton), who lived from 1008–1064, was a famous disciple of Atisha.

Marpa, again from Nalanda, followed in Atisha's footsteps, and founded the Kagyu-pa sect, which placed more emphasis on physical and mental meditation methods. Milarepa (1040–1123) was his disciple; he became famous in Tibet for his solitary meditation in numerous caves that are now revered in different parts of the plateau. The Kagyu-pa spread throughout the country in different monastic settlements and has remained strong in the Mount Kailash region.

With little outside interference, Tibetan Buddhism diversified. Throughout this time, the Tang and Song dynasties of China had no contact with Tibet. In 1073, Konchok Gyalpo founded a monastery at Sakya, near modern-day Lhatse. Together with his son Kunga Nyingpo, he founded the Sakya-pa. The famous monasteries of Reting, Tsurphu and Drigung were built. The Sakya-pa sect emphasised the importance of systematic study of the Buddhist scriptures. In the 13th century, the whole of China, Tibet and Mongolia was shaken by the conquering hordes of Genghis Khan. However, Tibet escaped most of the marauding armies' devastating expansion. One of the Mongol descendants, Godan Khan, effectively left Tibet alone, having been very impressed with the Buddhist ideals after a visit from Sakya Pandita. Mongolia made the Sakya-pa the dominant ruling sect until 1326, although it did tolerate the other sects. With the fall of the Mongol court, the region reverted to its former independent nations. The Sakya-pa lasted around 100 years before Tibet came under the control of Jangchub Gyaltsen. He was a follower of the Kadam-pa and came from the Phagmodru clans of southern Tibet. Various kings held power until 1642, when Mongolian intervention changed the status quo.

On the religious front, by the mid-14th century there were effectively four major sects. These were the Nyingma-pa, Kagyu-pa, Sakya-pa and Kadam-pa. Tsong Khapa was born in 1357, and he studied the four branches, reforming the earlier Kadam-pa teachings of Atisha to create the Gelug-pa. This reform reintroduced some of the more austere practices, cleansing some of the more liberal ideas. The reforms were aimed, in particular, at removing some of the Tantric ideas which dwelt more on the self, suggesting that achieving enlightenment could be done through individual methods, including indulgence of the sensual pleasures.

Tsong Khapa established the great monastic institution of Ganden (New Kadam-pa), as well as Sera and Drepung. He drew in the Kagyu-pa by agreeing with their disciplined meditation, but set out a path which used their ideas to give greater insight. The Kadam-pa sect became the new Yellow Hat sect of the Gelug-pa, and they have remained the dominant branch since then. As a result of the new reforms, the old Red Hat sect was in conflict with the Gelug-pa, particularly in the central region of Tsang. Gendun Drup was a nephew of Tsong Khapa and he took leadership of the new Gelug-pa order. It was at this time that the idea of reincarnation, a feature of the Karma-pa sect, was adopted by the Yellow Hats. Hence Gendun Gyatso and Sonam Gyatso followed on as the next incarnates.

It was Sonam Gyatso who attracted the interest of Mongolia, and through his contacts the clans from the north attempted to gain influence in the affairs of Tibet. It was they who gave the name to the institution of the Dalai Lama (Ocean of Wisdom). A power struggle ensued between the new Gelug-pa, the Tsang kings and the Karmapa, who was head of the Kagyu-pa at the time. In 1611 the Tsang king attacked Drepung and Sera monasteries. The nominated 4th Dalai Lama died in mysterious circumstances and the next incarnate was Ngawang Gyatso, who became known as the Great Fifth. He lived from 1617–1682. It was with the aid of Mongolian patronage that, in the hands of the 5th reincarnate, the position of Dalai Lama became the effective holder of power in Tibet, he being both head of state and spiritual leader. His teacher was eventually appointed as the Panchen Lama, the second highest lama of Tibet.

The Guge Kingdom lasted over 600 years until 1630, when it was overthrown in strange circumstances. The Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Antonio de Andrade, entered Tsaparang from the Mana pass north of the Garhwal peaks of India in August 1624. He left but later returned, and in April 1626 a church was built, with the support of the king. But in 1630 the Lamas of Tsaparang, fearing pollution from the new religion, connived with the neighbouring Ladakhis to overthrow the Guge monarch. The kingdom never recovered from this and went into decline.

Successive incarnate Dalai Lamas were found as children, often after elaborate rituals to locate and ascertain prospective candidates' true credentials as reincarnates. The 6th Dalai Lama was a wayward individual, more interested in women than study. Most others never reached maturity to take power, often being poisoned or dying young in mysterious circumstances. Power was retained by a series of regents. The effect of these long transition times was to allow for greater interference from outside. China and, to a degree, Mongolia were instrumental in many of the power struggles in Tibet. Chinese interference waxed and waned under different dynasties and Tibet became entangled in these episodes.

In 1717 the Dzungur Mongolians captured Lhasa and the town was not relieved until 1720, when the Chinese ousted the interlopers. From that time on China made claims on Tibet as protector. Again in 1792, following a Gurkha invasion from Nepal, it was the Chinese army that repelled the invaders. The Manchu dynasty held the reins of power in China, and indirect interference from the east persisted. All the following Dalai Lamas were either murdered or died mysteriously before attaining power.

In the period before the turn of the 19th century, the quest for control of power in Asia became known as the Great Game, with Russia, China and British India vying for land and influence. In 1774 the Bogle mission to Tibet was essentially one to secure British and Bhutanese peace and an end to raids across the borders. He managed to ingratiate the British with the Tibetans through his contacts with the Panchen Lama at his seat in Xigatse but contact with Lhasa was not so easy. These early British missions were essentially visits to promote trade.

Further missions of Turner and Manning followed, and Manning did succeed in reaching Lhasa. The now infamous march to Lhasa of Sir Francis Younghusband's mission in 1903-4 was ostensibly due to trade and the fear of a further increase in Russian influence in Tibet. It did little to foster good relations and ended ignominiously, with many Tibetans dead and no formal agreements, since the Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia.

The 13th Dalai Lama (1876–1933) was a much stronger character. The Manchu invaded Tibet in 1910, forcing the Dalai Lama to flee to India. When the Manchu dynasty collapsed a year later, the great 13th returned and became the effective ruler of an independent Tibet. He attempted to introduce a number of modernising ideas but was to some degree thwarted by intransigent conservative powers from within the large monk body. This was a period of ever better ties between India and Tibet, when expeditions to climb Mount Everest were permitted on the north side.

The death of the 13th incarnate brought little outward change and the regents pursued the same policies, keeping Tibet isolated and inward-looking.

The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, the current incumbent, was found in 1940 in the far northeast by the Reting Rinpoche, who later fell from favour. In 1950, following Mao Tse Tung’s victory over Chiang Kai Chek’s nationalists, his forces invaded Tibet. The young Dalai Lama was enthroned at the age of fifteen; he made one visit to Peking and met Mao. He remained in Lhasa until 1959, when his life became endangered. Following a dramatic escape across the Himalaya, he went into exile in India, where he remains to this day.

In recent years Tibetan urban centres have been radically modernised by the Chinese. It is in the countryside that one may find remnants of Tibetan culture little disturbed by the changes in society.

Gelugpa (Yellow Hat Sect) Lamas in Tashi Lhunpo, Xigatse

CHAPTER THREE

Religion in Tibet

> Experience, now extensive, has shown me that the Tibetans, who are more suspicious the more ignorant they are, become good friends and open their minds without reserve when one shows oneself respectful towards their religious affairs…
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

There are two aspects to the culture and religion of Tibet, and these relate to the faith of the people. Before the 7th century, Tibetan peoples believed in a religion based on natural phenomena; this religion became known as Bon and its adherents the Bonpo. Originating in Nepal and North India but subsequently eclipsed in those regions, Buddhism spread north across the Himalaya. In Tibet, Ladakh and further north to Mongolia, the faith became the dominant religion. It mutated considerably to give us the colourful and intriguing culture we see today.

Bonpo in Tibet

The earliest inhabitants of Tibet were people who followed a religion called Bon. They became known as the Bonpo or Bon-chos. The early Bonpo worshipped natural phenomena, like the heavens and mountain spirits, as well as natural powers such as rivers, thunder and trees. This also involved elements of black magic, sorcery and demon worship. Bon seek after the eternal truth and reality, and in this they are closely aligned with Buddhism.

The ancient Bon believed that all life started from eggs. Some scholars believe that this idea originated in Persia or the Tajik regions. The Bon ‘Thegpa Rimdgu’ is a major Bon text which maps out the four ways of the Four Transcendental Lords.

There are ideas that suggest that the Bon came not from Tibet but from an undefined place called Tazik, which might be in the Tajik country north of Afghanistan. Some scholars think there may be a link with ancient Persia. The Gandharan ruins in the North West Frontier region close to Peshawar in Pakistan may be a further link in this story. Evidence of the early Bon in India, in the form of ancient rock carvings, has been located close to Lari and Tabo in Spiti, and also in Khalatse and Donga in Ladakh. These earliest carvings incorporate images of the ibex (a male fertility object), the swastika and the sun. The female sex organ, the yoni, also appears in these carvings, representing the fertility aspect. It might be that the petroglyphs found around Rutok are ancient Bon carvings dated from before the 7th century. This early form of Bon may well have assimilated elements of early Shamanism, early Tantric themes and even some forms linked to ancient Hindu Brahman doctrines.

The Origin of Species according to Bon

The Bon believe that all life started from a single egg. From this cosmic egg came the god Sipa'i Sangpo Bumtri and the primordial mother, Chucham Gyalmo, known in her wrathful form as Sipa'i Gyalmo. She had many relationships, and as a result of one of them with the god of speech Lhago Thogpa, she laid three sets of nine eggs. The first set of nine eggs produced nine daughters, each with a human body and an animal's head. The second set also produced nine daughters. But from the last set of eggs, only eight daughters were born. All these daughters became protectresses of the faith. The last egg remained hard as stone. Not knowing what to do with it, Sipa'i Gyalmo discarded it. However, it fell into the hands of the demon king, and as he held it a voice cried out from inside, "I am the daughter of Sipa'i Gyalmo; let me out and I will serve you only." Thus a 27th daughter was born, and she became queen of the underworld.

Evidence of the early Bon in India, in the form of ancient rock carvings, has been located close to Lari and Tabo in Spiti, and also in Khalatse and Donga in Ladakh. These earliest carvings incorporate images of the ibex (a male fertility object), the swastika and the sun. The female sex organ, the yoni, also appears in these carvings, representing the fertility aspect. It might be that the petroglyphs found around Rutok are ancient Bon carvings dated from before the 7th century. This early form of Bon may well have assimilated elements of early Shamanism, early Tantric themes and even some forms linked to ancient Hindu Brahman doctrines.

Other early Bon centres identified include Lamayuru in Ladakh and in the valleys of the upper Kinnaur region northeast of Shimla. Certain imagery of various Bon deities has been found or referred to in folklore at Kanam, Puh (Poo), Namgia, Dabling and Khab in Kinnaur. Some of the Bon images can be likened to Shiva – Parvati, the Hindu god and goddess. Some traditions found in the villages of the isolated Pin valley close to Kaza in Spiti exhibit subtle links to Bon.

Three periods of Bon development can be identified. The Jola Bon, identified from interpretation of traditions by Rev. A. H. Francke, is the earliest form. Human sacrifice and ritual initiations occurred in this period. Evidence strongly suggests that villages in the upper Sutlej of Kinnaur observed some of these ideas, which are still the purest known forms of Bon.

The next phase has been called the Kyar Bon. This era finds its effects most obvious in the peripheral regions of Shangshung, in India (Kinnaur, Spiti and Ladakh), further from the heartlands of the Bon in Tibet. During this period, before the 8th century, the Bon and newly introduced Buddhist ideas mingled, with a blurring of the original Bon precepts and even its deities. The principal Bon deity Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche finds a close parallel in the Buddhist Sakyamuni, as does the Bon Kuntu Zangpo with the Buddhist Adi Buddha, the primordial Buddha. Whether the Bon influenced the Buddhist or vice-versa is open to question. Probably both exerted influences on each other.

The latter period of the Bon, called the Gyur Bon, is the period after Buddhism superseded the Bon from the time of Trisong Detsun in the late 8th century and after the conversions of Padma Sambhava.

In Tibet, evidence of the early Bon and the ancient land of Shangshung is to be found within the region of Ngari. Less than 100km southwest of Kailash lie the ruins of Khyunglung Ngulkhar; the silver castle of the Khyung bird. This place is believed by some to be the spiritual, ancestral home of the Bon and the centre of Shangshung. The Khyung bird has close associations with the well-known Garuda figure, a manifestation of such bird figures that occurs throughout many ancient cultures in different formats. The Garuda figure is common in India and Nepal. The Gurugyam cave monastery, not far from Tirthapuri, is also thought to have originally belonged to the Bon.

The first known Bon monastery was founded in 1072 at Yeru Wensakha, which is just east of Xigatse along the river Tsangpo. It has since fallen into ruins, but other Bon monasteries which exist today nearby are Menri, Yungdrung Ling and Tradang. Closer to Nepal, near Mount Xixapangma, is Lake Pekhu Tso, which has a Bon monastery, Pelha Puk, located on its eastern shore. A Bon monastery is also located in the Tibetan Kyirong valley, between Langtang and Ganesh Himal some 100km north of Kathmandu.

In the mountains of the central Changtang, northeast of Kailash, is a peak called Targo Ri. It overlooks Lake Dangra and is another mountain sacred to the Bon. Perhaps the most revered mountain of the Bon is now in south-eastern Tibet, close to Mt. Namche Barwa. Bonri lies in the Kongpo region, where the Tsangpo river cuts into deep gorges before dropping into India as the Brahmaputra.

Tonpa Shenrab (image overleaf) sought out the demon in his castle and, after a great contest of wits, he rescued the children and his daughter. Having made his escape, he took them to mystical Olmolungring. Much later Tonpa Shenrab arrived in Shangshung, riding on a Khyung bird. Tonpa later meditated at Gyangdrak below Yungdrung Tse, Mount Kailash.

The founder of the Bon was Tonpa Shenrab, who is said in legends to have descended from heaven to earth by way of Mount Kailash. He is considered to be the Bon equivalent of the Sakyamuni earthly Buddha of Buddhism.

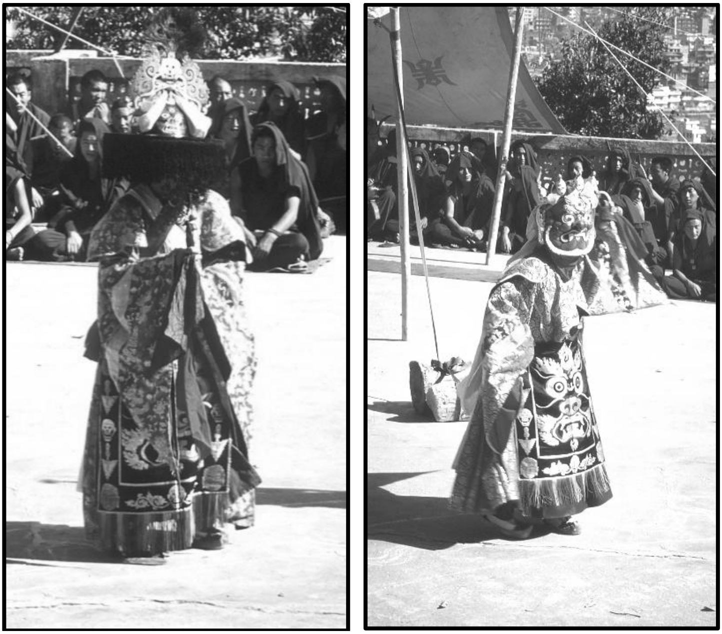
In one Bon legend concerning their venerated founder, Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, a demon seduced his daughter and, as a result, she gave birth to twins. Khyabpa La-Gring, the demon, lived in a demon castle fortress.

Many facets and features of Tibetan Buddhism originated from the Bon. The Bon religion and the Nyingma-pa, which followed and often assimilated many of the Bon practices later, appear to share many common roots. Both the Bon and the Nyingma-pa, the first or old sect of Buddhism in Tibet, propagated the teachings of the Dzogchen Tantras. A brief outline of Tantra and its ideas is given under Tibetan Tantra. The prayer flags, the idea of the oracles or trance doctors and many of the deities, yidams and dakinis are concepts common to both religions. The origins of the oracles are linked to Pehar. It is said that he was commanded by Guru Rinpoche to look after the first Buddhist Monastery in Tibet at Samye. Later, in another incarnation around the 17th century, Pehar is credited with coming to Drepung monastery near Lhasa, where he became an astrologer. From these humble myths the oracles of old became the powerful state oracles of the Gelug-pa in Lhasa.

Bon incorporates many animal-headed demons and deities as its protectors. The Khyung bird is very reminiscent of the Garuda. Some images of these bird deities have been found within the rock carvings near Rutok, just to the north of Guge. The symbol of the ‘wind horse’ on prayer flags brings luck, health and success. The white yak is particularly revered.

The Bon Yungdrung is very similar to the Tantric Buddhists' dorje, the thunderbolt sceptre. The Bon use the swastika sign, but theirs turns the other way (anti-clockwise).

The wheel of life, which we traditionally associate with Tibetan Buddhism, may also have been derived from Bon. The Bon wheel of life has one central monstrous figure with three heads, the pig, cock and snake that are separate in Buddhist charts. Turquoise, which is a popular decorative stone in Tibet, is the receptacle of the shadow soul - the *lha*, the hidden soul of Bon beliefs.



Losar at Triten Norbutse monastery, Kathmandu **Black hat dancer (left) Red Apse (right)**

In one tradition, the Bon play the drums in a strange manner. The drum is held in order to cover the face of the player. This is said to be a penance to cover the shame of Naro Bonchung, who lost to the magician Milarepa at Mount Kailash.

It may also be observed that a drum played with two attached balls is used at high speed by oracles to induce the trances they need for divining future auspicious times. This practice appeared under the ancient Bon and was called *pawo*.

Bon monks

Triten Norbutse Monastery near Swayambhunath, Kathmandu

Gyerpung Drenpa Namkha was a legendary figure who lived for thousands of years. It is said that he kept the Bon culture alive after doing a deal with Trisong Detsen. In an earlier incarnation he lived at the time of King Drigum, one of the earliest figures in the story of Bon. His second son is strongly linked to Guru Rinpoche. His image in deity form invariably has a black body and holds the anti-clockwise swastika in his right hand. His left hand holds a blood-filled bowl.

In 1977 the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala recognised and accepted the Bon as a 5th Tibetan sect. The spiritual head of the

Bon is known as Trizin. The small Tibetan settlement of Dolanji, south of Solan near Shimla in Himalchal Pradesh, is the site of the New Menri monastery of the Bon in India. Another very active Bon monastery, the Triten Norbutse, is located close to Swayambhunath in Kathmandu in Nepal. The Bon in Tibet are only recently re-emerging from the destruction of the Cultural Revolution.

Visiting a Bon monastery

Bon monasteries are quite rare in India and Nepal. Those in Tibet are often hard to reach. For those interested in seeing an active Bon monastery, Kathmandu and Shimla offer the two easiest options.

The Triten Norbutse Bon monastery in the Kathmandu valley is located below the Nagarjun hill on the west side of Kathmandu. The monastery is a very imposing sight, nestling in the forest above the valley; its bright paintwork means it can be seen clearly from quite a distance. It is accessed down a rough dusty road west off the main ring road, about 200–300m north of Swayambhunath. From this road, around 150 steps lead up to the monastery. There are around a hundred and fifty monks studying here.

The main dukhang is the red building, with a small chapel attached on the southwest side. The Lokapala guardians greet visitors here in the familiar Buddhist poses, though the artwork is of a somewhat different style. However, the wheel of life clearly illustrates the differences, with its three-headed central figure.

High above on the rooftop, the central wheel is flanked by two golden *makara*-like creatures (a sort of dragon/fish), instead of the antelopes of the Buddhist. Inside on the left and right walls are thousands of aspects of Tonpa Shenrab and the three prime deities, 30cm high figures painted on a blue background.

A series of banners hang down beyond the entrance with seats and drums behind. The doorway walls host Sipa'i Gyalmo on the left (north) inside. The main altar has a large 7m golden image of Tonpa Shenrab wearing a crown. On the left is a blue Namse or Zambhala Gonpo. Tonpa is surrounded by protecting nagas and makaras.

Losar is celebrated here at the same time as the Buddhist festival. However, the ceremonies begin a couple of days earlier with prayer meetings. During this ceremony two yellow-hatted monks, carrying a three-sided dagger, dance around the chapel. These daggers are to focus the mind on, and cut through, ignorance.

On New Year's Eve the masked dances take place, although the actual day may vary according to the actual auspicious time.

Significant Bon deities

Within the Bon religion there are considered to be four peaceful substantive deities. These are the 'Four Transcendent Lords', who are called Shenrap Miwoche, Shenlha W okar, Satrig Ersang, and Sangpo Bumtri. Depictions of the Four Transcendent Lords are to be found in the Zermig, the book of Bon.

Shenrap Miwoche, who is also more commonly referred to as **Tonpa Shenrab**, is the teacher. He is the Sakyamuni of the Bon. He holds the swastika sceptre in his right hand.

Shenlha Wokar is considered as the god of the priests, the white light that sets out a path. His definition appears to be similar to Amitabha, one of the Buddhist Dhyani Buddhas.

Satrig Ersang is the mother figure, the one with infinite wisdom. She is related to Prajnaparamita, the Buddhist deity of wisdom, and she rides on a lion. An incarnate of Satrig Ersang, **Zangsa Ringtum**, is credited with revealing the 'mother' Tantras. This factor has a strong resemblance to the 'mother goddess' figures in Nepal. The black hat dances of the Bon are related to the mother Tantras.

Sangpo Bumtri is the procreator. He is said in some mythology to be accompanied by a hundred thousand male and ten thousand female procreators. The Khyung bird, the enemy of serpents, is the companion of this cosmic god. The Khyung bird may not necessarily be related to or derived from the Hindu bird-like deity, Garuda.

There are a number of further manifestations of these four. Of particular note is **Kuntu Zangpo**. He can be likened most to the Samantabhadra of Buddhism (the Adi Buddha in Yab-Yum). He is a manifestation of Shenlha Wokar, being the enlightened one who is unfettered by possessions and appears naked. He also appears in yab-yum, in which case he is depicted black with a white female consort. The links between Bon and Nyingma-pa (and to some extent Kagyu-pa) are more apparent through these deities with common formats.

Shenrap Chamma is a further manifestation of Satrig Ersang, and is likened to the concepts of Tara within Tibetan Buddhism.

Kunzang Gyalwa Gyatso/Dupa is a curious figure; the image is very similar and perhaps a precursor to the thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara, the Tibetan Chenresig deity of whom the Dalai Lamas are considered reincarnations.

Bon also has **yidams**. These deities, both peaceful and wrathful, are used as focal points for adherents to meditate on different aspects, in order to understand the whole and reach enlightenment. This idea is used extensively in Buddhism. The yidam spirits have no actual existence in themselves, but are impressions of the karmic forces that one must resolve within oneself, particularly after death during the limbo-like Bardo state before the soul enters a new body or finds enlightenment. Yidams are often seen in front of flames and trampling on the bodies of enemies.

Kunzang Gyalwa Gyatso also known as Kunzang Gyalwa Dupa

Magyu, one of the important yidams, is a seven-headed, sixteen-armed deity who holds bowls of blood in each hand.

Of the ‘father’ Tantras, one can find five main deities. These are Welse Ngampa, Lhago Togpa, Trowo Tsochog Khagling, Welche Gekho and Phurba.

Welse Ngampa holds a green Tara-like consort. He has nine heads and, as a wrathful protector, he represents ‘piercing ferocity’. This concept of focusing on a property like ‘piercing ferocity’ is similar to the idea of the daggers in Buddhism, like those held by the deity Vajrakila, which point and so concentrate the mind in meditation. He has eighteen arms.

Sipa’i Gyalmo

Sipa’i Gyalmo is an important protectress, who is seen to relate to Palden Lhamo in Buddhism. She is Queen of the World and rides a red or black mule. She has another incarnation as Yeshe Welmo, a wrathful image with a black face and a crown of skulls.

In yet another vision she is Sigyal Dudruk. Sipa'i Gyalmo is a prominent deity in the Cham masked dances.

Lhago Thogpa is a companion of Sipa'i Gyalmo and, according to legend, they produced the twenty-seven eggs who began the Bon story.

Trowo Tsochog Khagling is an overseer of heaven and a Tantric wrathful deity who embraces his 'furious lady of the sky', **Khalo Dugmo**.

Apse is a warlike protector who rides a horse. He normally appears as a red wrathful deity and features in the Cham dances.

Welche Gekho is linked to Kailash, and has a Khyung bird on his head. This is similar to the Buddhist Tamdrin, who has a horse sticking out of his head. Shangshung Girung-Ma, or Nyipangse, also lives on Kailash and helps to guard over the Dzogchen teachings.

Purba has strong ties to Buddhism, being a deity of good actions. He appears in Nyingma-pa texts and is linked to Guru Rinpoche.

A few other deities are directly linked to ancient Shangshung; one of these is **Shangshung Meri**. He is golden in colour and has nine heads, of which three are human and the rest are animal. His name means 'fire mountain of Shangshung' and he is escorted by two consorts.

Taglha Mebar is a strange deity, a son of Tonpa Shenrab. He crushes enemies and wears tiger skins. He has three eyes and a garland of skulls.

The blue **Namse** a good luck idol, is also known as Zambhala Gonpo.

Since Bon monasteries are quite a rare thing in western Tibet, it is unlikely that you will see many of these images. However, those with a keen interest might consider visiting the Bon monasteries close to Xigatse. In Nepal there is a Bon monastery close to Swayambhunath stupa in the Kathmandu valley (see box). The other accessible monastery is New Menri near Shimla. In Ladakh the monastery of Lamayuru was formerly called Yungdrung and was a Bon Gompa.

> Hence one does not speak of one religion as being false, and another true; what is realised in spiritual life cannot be false; one can only speak of a greater or less approximation to that eternal truth which all religions aim at reaching.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Buddhist tenets

The philosophy of Buddhism is based on the four noble truths and the eight noble paths, which are as follows:

Four noble truths

These are firstly the truth of suffering, which occurs through the cycle of rebirth called *samsara*. The second truth is the desire for things, which will always lead to dissatisfaction when they cannot be obtained. Nirvana, or the cessation of desire, is the third truth, and the fourth is the way of the middle path as a solution.

> When talking about the nature of impermanence we must bear in mind that there are two levels. One is the coarse level, which is quite obvious and is the cessation of a life or an event. But the impermanent nature which is being taught in the 'Four Noble Truths' refers to the more subtle aspect of impermanence, which is the transitory nature of existence.
> ***Daily Advice from the Heart*, Dalai Lama**

Eight noble paths

These are the eight ways to attain the path to Nirvana. They are: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mind, and right concentration.

The two main branches of Buddhism follow different paths to achieve these goals. The Hinayana or 'old vehicle' looks to the scriptures of the Buddha. The 'new vehicle', the Mahayana, prefers to reach the goals by way of exploring the self, whether through learned teachers and masters or by self-inward-looking meditation.

The form of Buddhism in Tibet belongs to the Mahayana branch, which dwells more on the ability of a person to find his goals and his enlightenment within the religion. In Tibet the Mahayana Buddhism has mixed with Tantra and is known as Vajrayana. Tantra is described below. Some believe the Tantric ideas predate both Buddhism and Hinduism, being both ritualistic and pagan in their ancient format. Some even consider Tantra to be the earliest pagan form of devotion. Many adherents in India decried the general liberalisation of pure Buddhism by Tantric ideas, which may help to explain why Hinduism became dominant in India. However, these corrupted practices came northwards from India, as well as some of the Hindu ideas.

Buddhism initially flourished during the 5th century BC in India with the establishing of great universities and seats of learning at such places as Nalanda and Vikramashila. In fact Buddhism played an important part in the religious development across great swathes of Asia, west to Afghanistan and east into China. The great Buddhist universities of India declined in the 12th century with the advances of the Afghan Muslims.

Tibetan Buddhism assimilated the ideas of Indian and Nepalese Tantric Buddhism and blended it with the indigenous Bon. It also incorporated a lot of the demonic worship of the original occult Bonpo animistic ideas that formed the earliest religious practices in Tibet. The unique development of Buddhism in Tibet coalesced around the 11th century with the Kalachakra elements that relate to the Kangyur scripts. Kalachakra is the protector who turns the wheel of life.

Tibetan Buddhism was never completely cut off from its roots in India. In the early stages of its development, Tibetan kings and rulers invited many Indian saints, sages and teachers to help develop the religion. The most well-known of these practitioners were Shantarakshita, Padma Sambhava, Atisha, Marpa, Naropa and Tilopa. Tibetans were sent to India, mainly to the renowned Buddhist University of Nalanda in modern-day Bihar. The famous Tibetan translator, Rinchen Zangpo, spent several years in India expanding his knowledge.

It is beyond the remit of this book to detail the philosophy of Buddhism, but much is to be found throughout the text in relation to history, the different Buddhist groupings in Tibet, and the culture. Tibetan Buddhism became prolific in its styles, its themes and the ways in which differing aspects were developed.

Buddhism in Tibet

Buddhism, although considered as a religion, is in many ways more a philosophy for human development, a code of practice for a direction in life, a pathway to search for peace of mind and a way to find an end to worldly suffering.

Prince Gautama Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, was born the son of a king near present-day Lumbini in southern Nepal. His early life was one of luxury; he married the daughter of a neighbouring Raja. In his twenty-ninth year he was suddenly aware that there was more to life than he knew, so he left his wife and newborn son to take up the life of an ascetic. He wandered far and wide listening to sages, wise men and Brahmin priests, but could find no solace. After many temptations and much thoughtful meditation he became enlightened, choosing a pathway of acceptance of all suffering. Thus began Buddhism, in approximately 600BC.

Buddhism came from Nepal and India and was later modified as it travelled to Tibet. Although Buddhism appears quite different from Hinduism at first sight, Buddha is considered by Hindus to be an avatar – an incarnation of God. In one of the famous Hindu lyric poems, Vishnu is praised as the great God who, in the guise of Buddha, taught us kindness to all living beings and prohibited animal sacrifices. There are indeed some important doctrinal differences between Hinduism and Buddhism, but Buddha himself lived and died a Hindu and the two religions are closely intertwined.

Principal Buddhist sects

Nyingma-pa

Nyingma-pa is the oldest Tibetan Buddhist sect; its adherents are known as the Red Hats. It developed under King Trisong Detsen, who requested the Indian master Shantarakshita to teach Indian Buddhism in Tibet. In 765AD, Padma Sambhava, the Indian Tantric sage and magician, was invited to Tibet at the behest of Shantarakshita. These Buddhist ideas flourished under the Indian Tantrics. Tantra, in essence, uses the powers of mind expansion by any method. It postulates that a person can make his own path to enlightenment without the aid of teachers, collective meditations and reading of scriptures. Tantric practices were later corrupted when the use of sensual pleasure spread into the meditation techniques.

Contacts were established between India and Tibet, with many texts being translated. Padma Sambhava, later known as Guru Rinpoche, is generally considered to be the founder of Lamaism in Tibet. His image is often a little fierce; he frowns and carries a skull-laden staff and a vajra or dorje, the thunderbolt symbol. Yeshe Tsogyal, one of Guru Rinpoche’s consorts, allegedly wrote down some of his teachings to be released to following generations at auspicious moments. The Nyingma-pa and the Bon share many features.

Today the Nyingma-pa sect is still found in Tibet. It also continues to flourish in the Khumbu region below Mount Everest in Nepal, as well as in Ladakh, India, at Traktok monastery.

A significant branch of the Nyingma-pa are the Dzogchen-pa, the followers of the great perfection, who originated close to Samye monastery, southeast of Lhasa.

Kadam-pa

The Kadam-pa was developed in the 11th century after a Bonpo rebellion. Atisha, the Indian teacher, developed the Kadam-pa sect. He was a prince, a priest and later an intellectual. He hailed from the great Buddhist University of Nalanda. At the invitation of Yeshe O, he came to Toling for three years to propagate the Buddhist Dharma. One of his disciples was Dromton (Drontonpa), who later established a small sect of his own. Atisha held the view that Tantric methods to enlightenment should only follow on from prior in-depth reflection on the philosophy of the religion. The Kadam-pa later reformed under Tsong Khapa to become the Yellow Hat sect, the now-dominant Gelug-pa.

Kagyu-pa

The Kagyu-pa is a sect founded by the Indian mystics, Tilopa, Naropa and Marpa, a disciple of Atisha. His student Milarepa became the Kagyu-pa's great saint, as well as being a hermit and poet. In his early life he practised black magic. After he reformed he lived in isolation in the Himalaya. One of his more famous cave dwellings is near Nyalam in Tibet, just across the border from Nepal. The Kagyu-pa sect look inwards to concentrate their meditations on inner mental and spiritual matters, and above all to be close to their teachers. Today the Kagyu-pa sect still dominates the Kailash region. The Kagyu-pa sect adopted a number of subgroups, such as Dagpo, Drigung-pa, Druk-pa, Taglung-pa and the Karma-pa from Tsurphu, whose disputed reincarnates have become well known recently.

Karma-pa (Karmapa) is one of the better known of the main sub-sects of the Kagyu-pa. It is descended from the master, Gampopa. His student Dusum Khyenpa (1110–1193), the first teacher of the Drigung, built the monasteries at Tsurphu and in the province of Kham. There have been a total of 16 reincarnates. The 17th incarnate lama was recognised in Tibet in 1992. The Black Hat Karmapas are just one influential body within the sect, but are famous for their festival dances.

Drigung-pa

The Drigung sect has its founding monastery of Drigung Til about 125km northeast of Lhasa above the Kyi Chu river. Its founder was a Kham monk, known as Jigten Sumgon. He lived from 1143–1217.

Druk-pa

This is a Bhutanese sub-sect of the Kagyu-pa. It was formed in the 12th century in Ralung, near Gyangtse in southern Tibet. Because of persecution by Gelug-pa followers, many Druk-pa lamas left for Bhutan around this time. The Shabdrung, the spiritual leader of the Druk-pa sect, was a descendant of the original founder of the Ralung monastery, and in 1616 he also left Tibet for Bhutan, where the Druk-pa lineage developed and flourished in a unique way.

Jonang-pa (Chonang-pa)

The Jonang-pa are a subsect of the Kagyu-pa. Their head monastery and magnificent seven-storied chorten are northwest of Xigatse. The chorten of Jonang demonstrates artistic styles belonging to the Newari craftsmen of Kathmandu. Founded in the early 14th century by Dolpopa Shenrab Gyaltsen (also referred to as Je Kunga Ton Chho), this sect has strong links to ideas born from Kashmiri Shaivism and is looked upon with some disdain by stricter Buddhist adherents. Lama Taranatha, the prolific writer, belonged to this sect.

Sakya-pa

The Sakya-pa is another Tibetan sect, founded in the 11th century by Konchok Gyalpo. He founded the main Sakya monastery located south of Lhatse, west of Xigatse, south of the road to Kathmandu. Konchok Gyalpo was a pupil of Drogmi, who had also studied at Nalanda. The Sakya-pa sect stresses the need for the study of the existing Buddhist scriptures. There are few Tantric elements and students are recommended to emphasise both learning and study of the scriptures. The two great Tibetan Buddhist bibles, the Tengyur and Kangyur, were compiled under the Sakya-pa. The Sakya-pa dominated religious life in Tibet by 1220. By 1247, Kunga Gyetsan, a great Buddhist proponent, had encouraged cooperation between Tibet and Mongolia to boost the faith. Under Mongolian patronage the sect thrived. However when Tsong Khapa, the next reformer, appeared, the influence of the Sakya-pa declined markedly.

Shiche-pa

Although not a major sect, the Shiche-pa was an interesting group. It was originally founded by an Indian Tantric teacher, Janaka from Sind (now in Pakistan), who is known in Tibet as Pha Tampa Sangye. He came to Tibet by way of Kashmir and Ngari at least five times, and on one occasion went to China. He met with some Bon proponents in the Kailash region. Some of the rituals associated with the sect involve almost shamanistic ideas. Proponents carry thighbone trumpets and skull drums, which could only be activated by eating bone and skin. Later Pha Tampa Sangye founded a meditative school, the Chod movement. He died in about 1117AD. With no formal monastic base, the sect declined; this movement was one of roving ascetic pilgrims attempting to reach Nirvana by personal suffering and expounding pacifism. The Chod teachings that believe in rapid ways to enlightenment remained, however.

Gelug-pa

In the 14th century, the great Tibetan philosopher and reformer, Tsong Khapa, established the Gelug-pa sect, which became known as the Yellow Hat sect. This is the sect of the Dalai Lama. Tsong Khapa took the earlier Kadam-pa sect teachings of Atisha and transformed them.

In this form the Buddhism ideals reverted to a more purist format. A higher degree of morality and discipline was brought to the monk body. Some of the Tantric aspects were exorcised. The meditation disciplines and the teachings of the religion were cleansed. The first Gelug-pa monastery was established at Ganden near Lhasa, followed by the large monasteries of Drepung and Sera in Lhasa. The great Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Xigatse also belongs to this sect. The Gelug-pa sect has become the dominant group in Tibet, following the reincarnate lineage of the Dalai Lama, who is their spiritual leader.

Significant Buddhist deities

Sakyamuni (Sakya Tukpa) is the pure image of the mortal Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha, born in Nepal. He sometimes has blue hair; in most depictions he has a golden body and holds a bowl in his lap.

The **Dhyani Buddhas** face the four cardinal directions, meditating, and encompassing the universe. **Gyawa Ri Gna** is the Tibetan name. These five mystical Buddhas are found in the Mahayana form of Buddhism that developed over the subcontinent. The Dhyani Buddhas were created from the meditation and wisdom of the Adi Buddha, the primordial Buddha. The Dhyani Buddhas in turn evolved into the Dhyani Bodhisattvas, who gave creation to the universe. Some of these then gave us the human or mortal teachers.

Vairocana is the first Dhyani Buddha and resides in the stupa sanctum. He is the cosmic element, who is not often shown. Vairocana is the illuminator to light the way. He has been attributed great importance in western Tibet and Guge, being a much-venerated figure in India before the demise of Buddhism there. Vairocana is central in such monasteries as Toling, Tabo and Alchi. Not often seen in Nepal, on occasion he appears on the east side of large stupas there.

Akshobhya is the Dhyani Buddha who sits facing east. He is regarded as the second Dhyani and he looks similar to Ratna Sambhava, but his right hand has its palm facing inwards. Akshobhya has various wrathful forms including **Heruka**.

Amitabha is the oldest of the Dhyani Buddhas; he always faces west on a stupa. The Amitabha Buddha is linked to Sakyamuni, the earthly Buddha. **Opagme** is his Tibetan name. **Aparmita** is a version of Amitabha, with his hands clasping a vase on his lap. The **Panchen Lama** is considered to be his earthly representative.

Amoghasiddhi is the Dhyani Buddha who always faces north on a stupa or chaitya. Usually a serpent with seven heads stands behind him. This Dhyani Buddha is linked to the future Buddha, **Maitreya**.

Ratna Sambhava is the Dhyani Buddha who faces south; his right hand has its palm facing outwards.

Vajrasattva is the sixth Dhyani Buddha. He is the priest for the other five and is only found separately from his disciples. He carries a vajra and a bell. Vajrasattva is considered to be the Adi Buddha by the Kadam-pa Tibetan sect.

Amitayus is the Buddha of Boundless Life; an aspect of Amitabha; the Buddha associated with longevity practice and empowerment of longevity. He is found seated with a vase in his hands. In Tibet he is referred to as **Tsepame**. Those meditating on Amitayus are performing meditation on Kriya Tantra, mean limitless life.

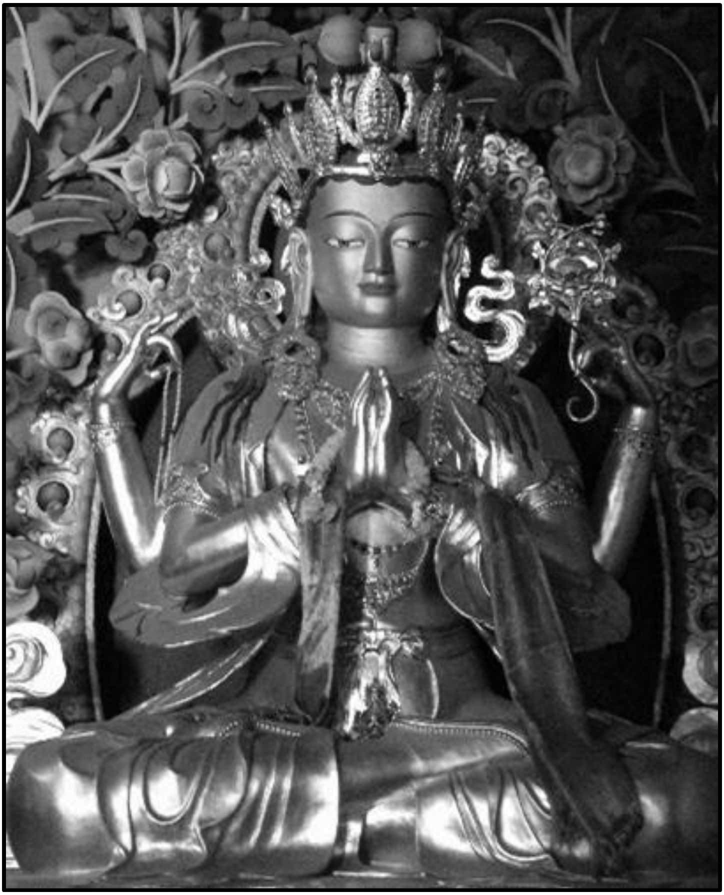
A **Bodhisattva** is a saint or disciple of Buddha who has delayed the attainment of Nirvana and has remained to teach. They are found in the Mahayana path of Buddhism. The term can be confusing. Translated literally, it comes from Bodhi, meaning highest consciousness, and sattva, meaning reality or essence within the living.

For the following icons, the Sanskrit names are shown in brackets.

Channa Dorje (Vajrapani) is a spiritual son of the Dhyani Buddha Akshobhya. He carries a dorje (vajra) and is a powerful wrathful protector in Tibet. He has monstrous Tantric powers and wears a snake around his neck. In this aspect he is related to the nagas with whom he is associated in Nepal. Vajrapani is the conveyor of the Tantric t=xts and a bodhisattva of energy.

Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) is a popular and famous bodhisattva. He has renounced Nirvana, the end of the cycle of rebirth. He embodies compassion (Karuna) and remains on earth to counter distress and suffering. He is believed by many to be the creator of our universe. Avalokiteshvara is quite commonly seen in visual form with eleven heads and ‘one thousand’ arms. The **Dalai Lama** is considered to be his earthly representative.

> Chenresig is filled with infinite compassion for all creatures. You simply cannot imagine how compassionate he is. As he saw their constant sufferings and struggles in the Round of Existence, from which they vainly sought a way of escape, so overcome with pity was he that his head burst and was shivered into fragments. Then his own lama, the Buddha of Infinite Light (the same who emanates into the Panchen Lama of Tashi Lhunpo), provided him with a fresh head and this happened no less than ten times.
> ***Peaks and Lamas*, Marco Pallis**



Chenresig with his four arms

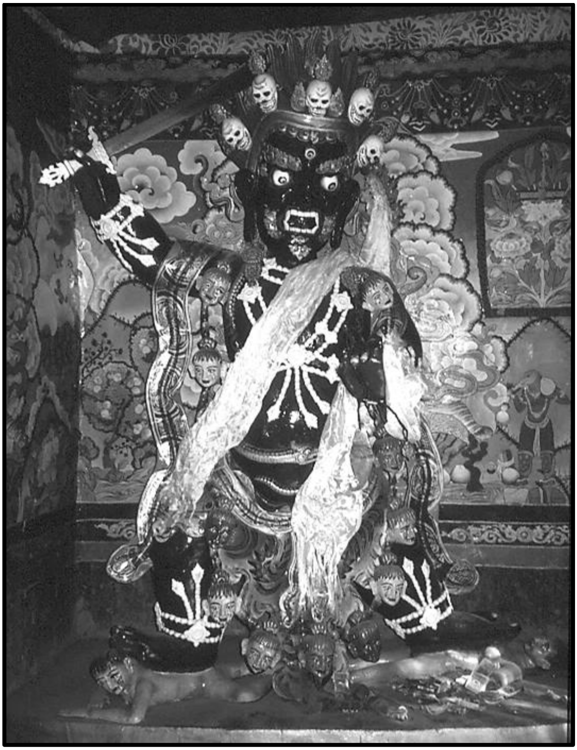
Tamdrin (Hayagriva), who guards many shrines, is a wrathful emanation of Chenresig. He is seen in blood red with a small horse sticking out of his head. He wears a garland of skulls and has bird-like wings on his back. He is often depicted with three faces. A ferocious vision of Tamdrin stands guard in the Lhakhang Karpo at Tsaparang. Tamdrin has links to Vishnu and has wings on his back like Garuda.

Jampelyang (Manjushri) is the god of divine wisdom. He carries a sword, which cuts through ignorance. According to tradition, he is a Chinese saint. To worship Manjushri gives intellect and intelligence. Manjushri is a popular bodhisattva and is considered to be the first divine teacher of Buddhism, giving inspiration.

Demchok (Chakrasambhava) is the guardian deity of Mount Kailash. He is normally seen in blue and holds the dorje. He is said to represent the union of bliss and emptiness when seen in yab-yum with his consort Dorje Phagmo (Vajra Varahi). Demchok is a Tantric meditation deity. Chakra (Cakra) means wheel.

Drolma (Dolma) is the Sanskrit **Tara** who is sacred to Buddhists and Hindus. She represents the maternal aspect, symbolising fertility, purity and compassion. Tara can appear in different colours: red, green, white, gold, and as Kali, dark blue. Each represents a different aspect of her nature. There are considered to be twenty-one aspects or forms of Drolma. Tara helps one to pass on, to rise from previous sin into a new beginning. Tara is often depicted with eyes in her hands and feet.

Dorje Jigme (Yamantaka) is the ‘slayer of death’ (see picture below), a wrathful emanation of Manjushri. He can destroy Yama, the guardian at the gates of heaven and hell. Yama is the deity who holds the wheel of life in his jaws. Dorje Jigme is a Gelug-pa deity. He is also known as Vajrabhairab and has a buffalo head. Wrathful deities are said to express the invincible message of compassion.



The **White Tara** was born of a tear from the bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara, a compassionate saviour and disciple of Buddha past. She is a consort of Vairocana, the first Dhyani Buddha. She is worshipped for long life, and for healing. She has seven eyes, three in her head, with two in each of her hands and feet.

The **Green Tara** is most often associated with the Nepalese **Princess Bhrikuti** who married the Tibetan King Srongtsen Gampo. She is worshipped for liberation from danger. She is also linked spiritually to Amoghasiddhi, the Dhyani Buddha, and inspires good in women.

Tara also has a ferocious form called **Ekajata**. She is seen standing on a corpse, has a third eye, is dwarf-like, ugly and usually blue. Ugratara also means a terrible version of Tara and is linked to the Vajra Yogini of Sankhu in Nepal. The rare **Red Tara** is called Kurukulla.

Palden Lhamo is another female deity, a version of Tara, sometimes linked to the blue Kali of the Hindus. She is a female protector of the Gelug-pa. A backdrop of peacock feathers sits behind her and she may hold a corpse in her mouth. Curiously, Palden Lhamo has connections to Bon. In one legend she marries a Bon king and, in order to stop the proliferation of the Bon through her son, she kills him. She uses his skin as a blanket to ride on her mule or horse.

Marmedze (Dipanker) is the enlightener, and is normally red in colour. At his birth, bright lights appeared miraculously. He is said to be a Buddha of a previous cosmic or lifecycle.

Jampa (Champa) (Maitreya Buddha) is the future Buddha to come and appears in a number of monasteries. His colour is yellow or gold and he is said to be preparing to come to earth. He usually stands, or sits with legs pointing downwards.

Medicine Buddha is engaged for healing the sick. He is often a blue colour and seen with four hands. In some chapels eight versions of this Buddha can be seen. The Medicine Buddhas feature in Guge paintings.

Vijaye is a goddess, a bodhisattva, who is one of the three deities of longevity. Her Tibetan name is **Namgyalma**. She has three heads and six arms, and embodies victory and fearlessness.

Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala) Mahakala is one of the eight aspects of terror and can be exceedingly ugly and ferocious in art forms. He is rather like the terrible Hindu god Bhairab and often tramples on bodies or corpses. He has strong links to Shiva through Bhairab and his trident.

Dharmapala is another name sometimes given to an aspect of Mahakala. But what are his adornments for, the ones that make us quiver?

Mahakala is always black or dark blue; he has three eyes which represent the past, present and future. His ghostly crown of skulls or gruesome heads represents the five delusions that poison a soul. These are ignorance, anger, desire, jealousy and pride. His sword is there to cut through ego, while the skull-cup of blood demonstrates his powers over wrongdoing. The necklace of skulls denotes his efforts to aid all beings, and when he stamps on animals it means he is crushing all obstacles to enlightenment. Wearing a tiger skin and other animal items, he suppresses anger and attains purification from the primary poisons of the soul.

Vajra Varahi is a red goddess who embodies the five wisdoms and pleasures. She appears nude and is sometimes seen trampling on Bhairab.

Kalachakra is a yoga Tantric deity. He can be seen with four faces, normally twenty-four arms, and stands on two Hindu figures on a lotus plinth. He is the deity of the wheel of time. His tiny yab-yum consort is Vishvamati.

The Four Harmonious Friends
In many Tibetan and Buddhist monasteries are paintings depicting four animals, one on top of the other. These are the Elephant, the Monkey, the Rabbit and the Bird on top. These represent the harmony that can act as a direction for peace and removal of conflict.

The Four Guardians are the deities seen at the entrance to most monasteries. **Dhitarashtra** is the guardian of the east, is white and holds a flute. **Virupaksha** guards the west. He is red with a stupa in his right hand and a serpent in his left hand. **Virudhakla** is guardian of the south and holds a blue sword. **Vaishravana** is guardian of the north. He has a yellow banner in his right hand and a mongoose in his left hand, usually seen vomiting jewels. He is also called **Jambhala**.

Dakini (Sanskrit) means ‘born of the pure realm.’ A dakini is a female deity, a demon goddess who can fly; she represents the emptiness that is found in the nature of reality. She is the female partner in Tantric union, a female Tantric deity who protects and serves the Buddhist doctrine and practitioners; a spiritual being. The Vajra Varahi and Vajra Yogini deities are often classified as dakinis. **Daka** is the male counterpart of a dakini; a male practitioner of Vajrayana.

Khandro (Tibetan) is a dakini or one who travels through space, a space voyager.

Deities found in the **Yab-Yum** position depict not just a sexual union, but the spiritual union that reaches to the pinnacle of awareness. This joining brings about a transformation of the fires and energies of the passion to give everlasting long life. Typical Yab-Yum below:

Yab Yum image

Some famous Buddhist personalities

Shantarakshita

The Indian Buddhist sage, Shantarakshita, lived in the early half of the 8th century and studied at Nalanda, the Buddhist University in Bihar, north India. He was probably born in Zahor, which most believe was centred on the Mandi region of Himachal Pradesh, where the famous Rewalsar monastery exits to this day. Some of his literary works were later translated into Tibetan to form part of the Tengyur and Kangyur book teachings.

In an extraordinary twist of fate, some of his greatest works in his native Sanskrit language were lost in India and had to be reintroduced there from the Tibetan.

His greatest inspirations dealt with logic, and his fame preceded him as he journeyed through India and Nepal to Tibet. The Bon did not take kindly to his teachings in Tibet. He soon left and spent six years in Nepal before again being summoned to Tibet at the behest of Padma Sambhava. He became the first abbot of Samye Monastery and did much to ensure that the seeds of Buddhism ignited by Padma Sambhava grew to fruition.

Guru Rinpoche (Padma Sambhava)

Known as Guru Rinpoche in the Himalaya, he is the lotus-born Tantric master who established Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th–9th century at the invitation of King Trisong Detsen.

The Tantric master and sage, Guru Rinpoche

The Nyingma-pa Red Hat sect began at around the same time. In Tibet he tamed hostile spirits and made it possible to build Samye monastery. Although he was able to learn the teachings spontaneously, he pretended to have to study in order to instil confidence in ordinary people. And he hid various important teachings in Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, in order that they may be revealed for future generations in years to come. He was also known as **Padma Kara**. One of his consorts was **Yeshe Tsogyal**, another was Mandavara.

The Early Life of Padma Sambhava (Guru Rinpoche)

Padma Sambhava was an 8th century India Buddhist sage and Tantric magician, who was invited to Tibet by Shantarakshita, an India Buddhist master. With his great spiritual power, he created the conditions for the propagation of the teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism in this world in the 8th century. And he hid various important teachings in order that they may be revealed for future generations, even to this present day. In Sanskrit Padma means lotus flower, and Sambhava means born from. In Tibet and Ladakh, Padma Sambhava is also known as Guru Rinpoche.

According to legends there was a king, Indrabodhi, who had no son. He was a kind ruler, but one day he ran out of money. He knew that on an island lived the naga (snake) king’s daughter, who possessed a great jewel that would satisfy all wishes. After crossing oceans and fending off demons, the king finally reached the golden island and retrieved the precious jewel. On his way home, he saw an eight-year-old boy sitting alone on another island, carrying a vajra in one hand and a lotus in the other. The king spoke to him, and, realising from that he must be a wise emanation, took him for his son. When he returned home he asked the jewel to restock his treasury, which was miraculously done. Then the king gave alms to all who asked; clothes for the cold, food for the hungry, and a shower of gems for the poor. He told them all they must study and practise Mahayana Buddhism.

The son and prince was Padma Sambhava, and as the prince grew up, he realised that he could not benefit the people by ruling the kingdom. So he murdered the son of one of the ministers, in order that he would be banished. He was sent to live in the charnel grounds among the corpses in Zahor (possibly close to modern-day Mandi).

One day he heard about an evil king named Shakraraja. Padma went to his land wearing the skin of the corpses as his clothing. He ate the flesh of the males and copulated with the females. He brought everyone under his power and was known as the Rakshasa demon; he became a powerful yogi.

Then, having pondered on the troubles of the world, he approached two monks and said, “I will not do any more evil; please accept me,” as he handed over his weapons. They sent him to their master, who taught him more Yoga Tantra. In order to practise the ‘secret mantra’, Padma Sambhava found a beautiful young maiden. They went together to the Cave of Maratika, and after three months they saw a vision of Amitayus. He blessed them both, master Padma as Hayagriva (a protector) and his consort as Vajra Varahi (a boar-headed female deity).

When Padma and his consort returned to his homeland, the people recognised him as the man who had killed the son of their minister and tried to burn them both to death. However, the fire was still burning after twenty-one days, and all were afraid to go and look. But the king, who was Padma Sambhava's father, thought, "If he really is a miraculous emanation, then he won't burn." So he went to have a look. Sitting in the middle of a huge lake were Padma and his consort, adorned with garlands of skulls in order to liberate beings through compassion. The king was filled with wonder.

Later, from a historical point of view, Padma was invited to Tibet by King Trisong Detsen around 747AD. He is generally credited with being the founder of Tibetan Lamaism, mixing Mahayana Buddhism and the existing Bonpo cults together. Padma was a teacher of the Tantric school. In Tibet he is revered by the Red Hat or old school, Nyingma-pa sect, and is known as Guru Rinpoche.

As Guru Rinpoche he travelled across Tibet meditating in many caves along the way, including one below Mount Kailash. His main task in Tibet, according to legends, was to subjugate the local spirits. These Bon spirits constantly sought to destroy his attempts to build the holy temple of Samye monastery. But on his journey, he manifested as a fierce character, terrifying all who saw him. In this way Samye monastery was finally built. After creating Samye monastery, he intended to return to India, but in fact he did not do so for approximately 56 years, so it is said…

Atisha

Known as Dipankara Shrijnana by Indian scholars, Atisha was born in 982AD, probably in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Being of a well-spoken and inquisitive nature, the young student found his way to Vikramashila, one of the Buddhist universities in India. Later he studied at Odantapura, the third of the great Buddhist institutes of India at the time. He mastered many of the Tantras, the often-esoteric scriptures of Vajrayana.

It was while he was back at Vikramashila that he was invited to Tibet by Yeshe O, who wished to rid Tibetan Buddhism of its increasingly corrupted Tantric practices. Yeshe O spent his entire fortune on emissaries to encourage Atisha to Toling in Guge. In fact it was not until after Yeshe O's death, during the reign of his sons, that Atisha finally agreed to forsake Vikramashila for Tibet. He travelled via Kathmandu, visiting the holy hilltop site of Swayambhunath, and arrived at Toling in 1042. Atisha lived in Toling until 1045, where he met Rinchen Zangpo. Atisha was instrumental in forming the first reformed sect, the Kadam-pa aided by Dromton. Finally he set forth to Lhasa. He died in 1054, before returning to India.

Milarepa

Tibet's poet saint was an historical figure, around whom many legends have grown up. In his 'Hundred Thousand Songs' he left Tibet perhaps its greatest poetic legacy. Milarepa was born as Mila Thopaga in Kya Ngatse in the western Tibetan province of Gungthang. His name means 'joy to hear', hence his famed posture with one hand to his ear. However, tragedy struck when his father died when Mila was only seven years old. His uncle and his family then enslaved him and his sister, treating him so badly that their mother sent him away to a lama. That lama taught him black magic, and one day, so it is said, Mila put a curse on his uncle, causing his house to fall down and killing many people.

Later Milarepa felt remorse for his actions and sought out a guru, turning to the great teacher and translator Marpa. Marpa put him through some extreme tests and sent him to very remote caves to meditate. Twelve years later Milarepa attained the Vajradhara state, or complete enlightenment. After this he became known as Milarepa, the cotton-clad one.

Tsong Khapa

Known in Tibet as **Je Rinpoche**, he is the founder of the Gelug-pa sect. He usually wears a yellow pointed hat and his hands are together with fingers pointing upwards, in the teaching position or mudra. He often sits between two similar Buddha figures called **Gyeltsab Je** and **Khedrub Je**. He was born Lobsang Tskpespel in Amdo province in 1355AD and educated at Shar Dzong monastery. He studied further in Lhasa, and probably as far away as Kashmir. He sought to reduce the influence of Tantra and revert to more orthodox teachings. Being unable to influence existing monastic institutes, he founded his own place at Ganden, east of Lhasa.

Tsong Khapa insisted on complete celibacy for the monk body, removing the temptations of individual Tantric methods, which tended to degenerate to physical paths to find enlightenment. He introduced more than two hundred vows to cleanse the approach to these newly regenerated stricter ethical codes of Buddhist meditations. Austerity, discipline, humility and piousness characterised the new Gelug-pa sect monk body. Tashi Lhunpo, Drepung and Sera were founded in central Tibet by the Gelug-pa sect. Most of the larger monasteries in Ladakh also became Gelug-pa followers, for example Alchi, Likir, Rizong, Shankar, Spituk and Thikse, as well as many smaller ones in Zanskar.

The fifth Dalai Lama

The great fifth, Lobsang Gyatso can be confused in paintings with Tsong Khapa, but he holds a dharma wheel and lotus flower.

Kailash and Tantra

Mount Kailash is associated with four religions, but it is also linked to Tantra in its many forms. Tantric sages and saints, Tantric texts, Tantric practices and Tantric mythology can all be linked to the mountain and the lands surrounding it. Each of the four main Tibetan Buddhist sects has elements of Tantra; some are more closely linked to it than others.

What is Tantra?

In Sanskrit, Tantra means liberation, an expansion of ideas. Taken literally, it means an expansion tool, a way of increasing the awareness of the mind to reach the divine level. The Tantras are the texts or scriptures of teachings from the Vajrayana branch of Buddhist thought.

Some scholars believe that Tantric ideas can be traced to Stone Age art, which evolved from ritualistic pagan ideas. Its origins probably predate all the ancient religious concepts of India, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism. The origins of Tantra have sometimes been accredited to those from ancient Gandhara, in northwest Pakistan, where a considerable number of Buddhist ruins and artefacts have been found. Some early Tantra sutras make mention of Shambala and Shangshung. It was transmitted orally until around the 3rd century AD. Its earliest forms were integrated into witchcraft, shamanism, blood sacrifices and other pagan practices. Some of these pagan ideas have survived to manifest today in temple art, festivals and daily rituals.

Later, pagan Tantra was suffocated by new ideas. These new ideas, Hinduism and Buddhism, suggested that all life was a cycle of suffering and rebirth on a path to enlightenment. Tantric themes continued to influence Buddhism through the Vajrayana path and were still practised quite openly. Its more liberal ideas suggested, in effect, that ‘paradise’ was achievable ‘now’ and that each being could find his own path, like a fast track to enlightenment. Tantra in these forms was virtually obliterated in India by the Muslim invasions of the 12th and 13th centuries. The invaders found the idol worship and liberal concepts totally abhorrent. Hidden behind the Himalaya, though, Tantra survived in Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal and the remoter parts of Assam.

Most forms of Tantra were subject to animistic ideas, with a corrupting of more idealistic thought. However, Tantra also developed in less pagan ways, having both physical and mental strands to reach a complete state of peace. Some people perform Tantric meditation that does not involve any physical methods, but is purely visual and uses the imagination. Much of Tantra reaches to the esoteric, far beyond the confines of religion.

Everything in the physical world is seen as opposites of polarity. This is the Shiva-Shakti, male-female aspect within Hinduism. Duality is Tantra's prime direction. Within the male-female domain there is some overlap, but each is incomplete without the other. There is suffering. Tantra interweaves the two to make one. There are elements of the female within the male and vice-versa. Balance can only be achieved through the actions of both acting as one. In Tantra the coupling enables the fiery energies to join and the intellects to exchange in order to escape to a higher consciousness.

Tantra in the Hindu sense seeks to utilise the inner female power to save the world from destruction. One must strive to balance the male-female energy on earth to open up to the cosmos. Tantrics strongly worship the female, both as the true female and the feminine part of the male. Shiva is a corpse in Tantra, and only through union with the all-powerful female can the male attain consciousness to make him whole. Shakti gives him form by flowing through him. The powers of destruction in Shiva are needed to lead to rebirth, re-growth and regeneration.

Some Hindu Tantrics worship ten different goddesses, believing that each represents an aspect of teaching and knowledge to aid self-realisation. Each of the ten paths or goddesses are forms of Shakti. There is a link here with the ancient worship of the goddess and mother goddess, which some believe predates the current religious concepts. In Nepal there are many manifestations of this theme in and on the temples of the Kathmandu valley. The great stupa of Swayambhunath, sacred to both Buddhists and Hindus, is veiled in a Tantric cloak. Its traditions, symbols and deities ooze with Tantric overtones. The famous paintings of the Guge kingdom similarly exhibit Tantric ideas in vivid colour.

Tibetan Tantra

In Tibet, the Tantric ideas originally came from India, together with Buddhism, before the Muslim invasions south of the Himalaya. Tibetan Tantra developed further in the 11th century, as we have discussed earlier. It survived and followed a different path, becoming mixed with the Tibetans' own Bonpo pagan concepts of black magic, sorcery and witchcraft. Tibetan Tantra involves the occult, the magical. Even in modern times these traditional rituals exist. The Oracles, a sort of witch doctor advisor to the high lamas, were formerly part of the Tibetan state. Some still remain in Ladakh. They still use the medium of dance and trance to delve deep into the occult for answers, and to define auspicious moments for celebrating, appeasement and to invoke higher powers.

In its most visual forms, we see Tantric images depicted in the ritual embrace of the deities and the dakinis. Tantric temples often show these deities as ferocious, gruesome demon-like images. Each deity, whether wrathful or protective, represents actions, deeds or thoughts that one has to focus on along the path of mind expansion. The demonic images that portray wrathful thoughts can be used to meditate on the idea behind these masks of ferocity, thoughts deep in one's soul that might be cleansed to reach bliss.

Some Tantrics and Siddhis, those with miraculous powers, were said to be able to project their own consciousness into other beings. We are in the realms of the exoteric now. Within the astral universe, the cosmos filled with good and evil thoughts, playing with fire of this magnitude is indeed playing with the supernatural. Some Tibetans claim to have been able to leave their earthly bodies, experience these supernatural phenomena and return to their living bodies. Such people are known as a Delog. Then there are the she-devils, the lhamos and the bhutas, evil spirits, the dragons of Tibet and Bhutan.

Reincarnation is central to Tibetan Buddhism and here again we find a link to Tantra. Some Tantrics believe that the soul enters a human being or a human condition to achieve its divine purpose. This soul cannot be destroyed, but merely passes from one life to the next. We may never glimpse into our past lives, but perhaps in fleeting moments, through premonitions for example, these lives can manifest. Why then do we not reap the benefits of these earlier lives? We do benefit, but for greater understanding we need to be free of past ideas. Some Tantric meditation endeavours to find the truths of earlier existences.

The four forms of Tantra postulated by the Buddha are differentiated by the significance of each aspect's degree of internal meditation and the external use of rituals in the practices. The Kriya Tantra, which basically means actions, involves ritual aspects such as rites of magic which are found more in the old sect Nyingma-pa; for example occult aspects, oracles, and subjugation of the aspects employed by the wrathful deities. The Charya Tantra relates more to personal performance; this involves aspects of internal meditation and external ritual in more equal parts. In this form the Tantra teachings are exercised more through meditation, but with some external rituals. The Yoga Tantra has more to do with union of thoughts and actions internally. This meditation is used almost exclusively for internal awareness, but some rituals can be used. The last class of Tantras is the Anuttara Yoga Tantra, which means literally 'unsurpassed union'. These are rites of supreme yoga, with yet more emphasis on internal meditation. The external rituals are essentially to be ignored. Rinchen Zangpo brought some newer Tantras from India, including the yoga class, to Tibet.

It is the fourth branch of Tantra that has been more misunderstood. In some concepts it is accepted as purely a function of the mind, regarding internal meditations. In other definitions it has been widely modified and has been interpreted much more loosely. Many Tantrics consider that one may reach enlightenment in one life and use methods that are both sensual and sexual to shortcut to this point. The Yogini Tantras, which inspire some of this thought, are more loosely integrated with the stricter Buddhism beyond Tantra. These Tantras are biased towards the meditations on the east-facing Dhyani Buddha, Akshobhya.

Recently there has been an upsurge of interest in the more physical forms of Tantra. Tantric yoga and Tantric sex are used to shortcut these other methods of finding the desired state of enlightenment, the release from earthly sufferings. The embrace of the couple is both physical and spiritual. Its adherents believe it allows the combined energies to flow, to enable the souls to be taken on to a higher astral plane.

In Tibet, the Bon and the early sect Nyingma-pa have close links to a form of Tantra known from the Dzogchen Tantras. Dzogchen means the great perfection, and these are considered the highest Tibetan teachings. Dzogchen is considered by Bon adherents to be the ‘ninth way’ of the Bon. It is also closely linked to Padma Sambhava. The Dzogchen Tantras consider three principal aspects which cover three different ways of meditations and the seeking of enlightenment that can be undertaken. The three classes are mental, emptiness and esoteric, which are all ways to reach ‘all-surpassing realism.’ Compassion is the highest aim.

The lesson of the teaching, the route or path one follows and the ambition of finding total bliss is considered together in thought as one. One seeks to abandon any attachment to things, whether pure or impure thought, to bring an inner calm. The Kalachakra Tantra, one of the more familiar Tantras, involves the wheel of time, a thread from which no one can break free. Many later teachers of Buddhism, as well as laymen, particularly in India, considered that these liberal ideas were far too hedonistic in nature and considered them heretical.

Also closely linked to Tantric practice are the ideas of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bardo teachings, Tantras which relate to the transition period between death and rebirth.

CHAPTER FOUR

Monastery art and design

Buddhist art represents serenity, ferocity, eroticism and ecstasy, seen with equal frequency throughout its different forms. The first visual impression is one of sensory overload. Yet there is some order in the singularly disordered.

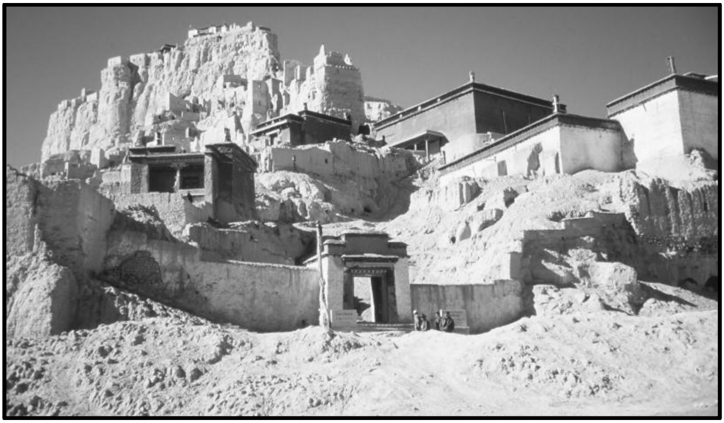
Types of monasteries

There are four main designs of Himalayan monasteries. The first is the mandala style, the design followed by the first monastery in Tibet at Samye. The Toling Yeshe O temple in Guge also shows this style.

The second design of monastery is found in Ladakh, such as Alchi, and Sani in Zanskar etc. During this period Buddhism had hit its zenith; there were few enemies to the state religion. The Alchi Chos complex is bounded by walls and sits on the plains. A similar style is used at Tabo in Spiti.

A third style is found in West Nepal, Mustang and Bhutan, where chapels and buildings enclose the courtyards.

Lastly there are the hilltop monasteries such as Tsaparang, which cling to the tops and sides of defensive hillocks and isolated promontories. Monasteries were constructed on high, often impenetrable hilltops, fearing constant threats from the west. Forts invariably protected such monasteries.



Tsaparang hilltop complex

Such natural rock fortresses are not only seen above Toling and Tsaparang, but as far north as Nyar-ma and Lamayuru in Ladakh, all linked to Rinchen Zangpo. In Ladakh the monasteries of Thikse, Chemrey, Likir, Phyang and Rizong are in this style. In Spiti, Ki and Dhankar hug hilltops.

Monastery art

The surprise about all the monasteries of Guge is that the art contained therein is so strongly linked to Kashmir, where Buddhism has been annihilated by Islam. Yet Kashmir was, with Ghandara, completely besotted with Buddhism in the Kushana period, at least until 520AD when the empire collapsed under invading hordes from the west. (Taxila in Pakistan survives as one record of that empire).

There are several forms of art throughout the region, which can be categorised into three main groupings: statues, with subgroups of clay and metal; paintings, with subgroups of murals and fabrics, such as thangkas; and wood carvings. Monasteries throughout Tibet, Spiti and Ladakh have many common features and art forms. Deities are similar, although there are regional variations and even variations in the names of the same deity. For example the protector deity, called Hayagriva in Sanskrit, is Tamdrin in Tibet and occasionally Bek-tse in Ladakh.

Monastery art also shows distinct periods. That produced in the earlier period, 11th to 14th century, is associated with the Kashmiri style. Later art is more related to Lhasa and central Tibet, being influenced by the coming of the Gelug-pas.

All the temples display art forms that relate to the deities and gods. We see in the paintings and statues of Tibetan Buddhism the yab-yum art forms, where gods and demons are in the embrace of female partners. The yidams, who are the tutelary divinities, are invariably shown in yab-yum positions. The fierce protectors are often seen clinging on to their partners with especially intense emotion, and with all their limbs, as the fires burn around them. This emphasises the connection between all religious ideas and the cycles of life in creation, birth and death. In the more serene depictions, the lotus flower is often seen as a plinth or base for the gods and deities. It is at the heart of the creation of life. Brahma, the creator, was born of a lotus flower. The lotus is pure and from it life will spring.

Above some of the main Buddhas or Bodhisattvas one might find some protectors such as the fish-like, demonic-looking figures known as Makaras. A birdman, Garuda, or Khyung figure usually sits above all the other images.

Statues

Throughout Tibet are some amazing examples of bronze and gilded work. Some of the images have been constructed under the guidance of Newari artisans from Nepal. The original centres for this art form in Nepal were Patan and also Bhojpur in east Nepal. Metal sculptures are made by the Lost Wax method. Using this method, wax is used to outline the image, then it is covered with clay. After heating, the wax is drained, and molten metal is poured in. See Bibliography for more information.

Statues, whether made of bronze and gilded metal, or of clay, are invariably elaborate designed and executed by craftsmen. The sculptures are unbelievably intricate, with multiple heads and arms intertwined, teeth and fingernails sharply defined. Most of them are painted in incredibly vivid colours.

Fabulous examples of Vairocana (often referred to as the Sarvavid Vairocana) are found at Alchi in Ladakh, as well as at Nako and Tabo in Spiti. Sadly, most of the statues of Toling and Tsaparang were wrecked during the Cultural Revolution. Much of the artwork within those monasteries was destroyed. The new art which has replaced some of it reflects the modern era but is nonetheless still impressive.

Paintings

Whether frescoes on the monastery walls, or paintings on fabric, such as the beautiful often gold-painted thangkas, exquisite workmanship has survived sometimes hundreds of years, defying the ravages of nature as well as the Cultural Revolution. Some of the paintings need to be studied with a magnifying glass to see the finest detail. Similar to thangkas in style, but predating them, are the paubha paintings in the Kathmandu Valley that are often even more detailed. These paubha paintings are generally images of Buddhist deities, although Hindu deities are also produced.

The influence of Kashmiri art, as found in the Guge Kingdom (see History), is seen in the presence of smaller depictions, sometimes of ordinary people in village scenes as opposed to deities. But it is also seen where large paintings of deities or mandalas are surrounded by a huge number of smaller Buddha figures. The colours tend to be greys, white, reds and darker. The intricate details of some of the scenes show clearly the link to Indian styles, including the styles used at Ajanta in central India north of Aurangabad. With the introduction of the reformers of Tsong Khapa, the art gained a more Tibetan style. Colours tended to be stronger, and more deities covered the walls. Mandala images and the deity Vairocana, the fifth Dhyani Buddha, very common under the Guge period, are less in evidence after the 15th century.

Thangkas

Thangkas are Buddhist paintings, which are found in all monasteries in Tibet. They are sacred scrolls that function as focal points for the practitioner. Traditional thangkas are painted using natural pigmentations; gold is particularly important. Many depict the stories of the life of Buddha. Most tend to depict a central deity surrounded by lesser figures. Most are from Tibetan Buddhism. Another less common art form is the Tshog-shing, a Tibetan word. In these pictures the central figure is either Gautama Buddha or the long-nosed, yellow-hatted reformer Tsong Khapa. This figure will most often be surrounded by hordes of disciples, witches, divinities, guardians and yidams.

Thangkas were also produced for ordinary people at the behest of their religious teachers. These would often depict the sentiments closest to their hearts, such as desires for long life and happiness. The deities would reflect these desires.

Today thangka painting has developed from being a purely religious skill to become an art form in its own right. Thangkas are now produced for sale to tourists, but retain traditional styles and methods of production. The same artistic skills are used to paint the monastery walls.

Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life is a graphic representation of life, showing all its mundane aspects. It is a pictorial way of showing us the cycles of life, birth and death into which we are locked by our human desires. These art forms are often found near monastery entrances and follow a general format, with variations depending on the artist.

At the centre are three rather strange animal figures. These are the snake, pig and large bird, which are biting each other. They represent hatred, ignorance and greed. The six main segments depict the realms of different rebirth. The heavenly realm is at the top, and the hellish realm at the bottom. All beings must pass through these different realms. A Buddha figure offers his teachings in each segment. Around the outside are twelve further segments, illustrating the periods of life from birth to death.

The wheel is held by the god Yama, the lord of death, the god who sits in judgement. He is seen tearing and biting it. Buddha is to the right of Yama. He points to a Bodhisattva on the left, who can suggest a way out of the wheel, out of suffering to Nirvana.

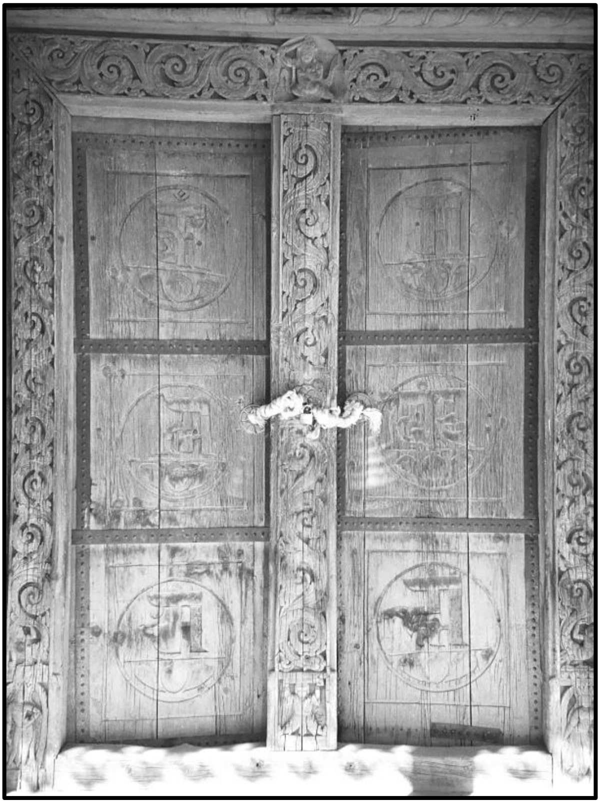
Although quite similar, the Bonpo wheel of life has one main image with three heads at its centre, instead of the three separate animals.

Mandalas

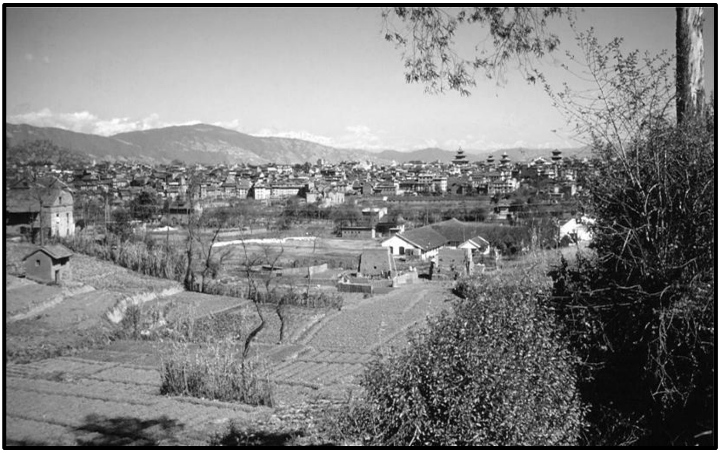
Mandalas are other diagrammatic art forms. The geometric shapes within the whole represent the different constituents that help to bring a realisation of enlightenment. Part is the cosmic aspect and other parts are the essence that makes the whole. Circles are the main feature, representing the infinite. Squares represent the form of the universe.

Wood carving

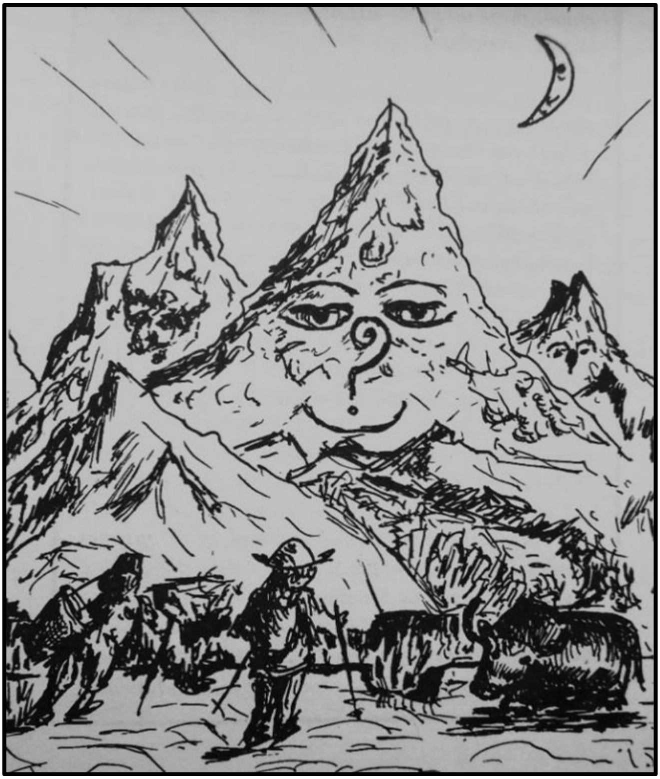
This art form is not so common in Tibet, perhaps because of the shortage of trees. Generally speaking, wood carvings are found on doors, frames and on background art, rather than representing the deities themselves. In a few places one might see a decorated wooden arch over the main deity. Doors at Toling monastery and at Tsaparang exhibit some carved wooden decoration. In Ladakh, where some trees grow, these are found at Alchi. A rare example of intricate wood carving is found on the entrance to the Sum Tsek Lhakhang at Alchi. This is called a ‘Trifoliate’ arch.



Elaborate wooden doors of Toling Red Lhakhang Marpo



Down memory lane – Kathmandu Valley 1975



Legends abound across the Himalaya, including about the mystical lost peak of Rum Doodle!

CHAPTER FIVE

People of Tibet

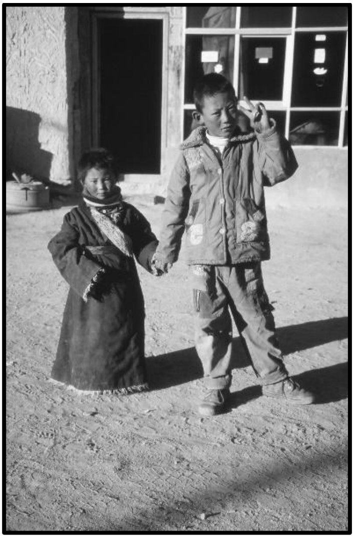
There are only a few towns in the part of western Tibet described in this book, and most of the people who live here are nomads.

The Tibetan nomads who inhabit much of the desolate mountain and valley systems of Tibet and the Changtang to the north are called Drokpa. The high-altitude country of Western Tibet cannot sustain agriculture, but is ideally suited to grazing. Yaks, sheep and goats are the main grazing animals, although the extremely high western regions are best suited to goats, where stunted grasses offer less fodder. In general, all the animals subsist on whatever grasses are found, with little added food.

Hay is made in those places where summer grasses are more abundant. This is done in September. A typical highland yak weighs around 200–250kg and one yak is said to be worth six sheep or seven goats. We were informed that a yak might be worth over three hundred US dollars. Wolves are the main predators for the nomadic herds. Dogs help to keep them at bay and should be treated with care by visitors if the owners are not close by. The lynx and snow leopard are other less-seen predators.

The animals provide meat, milk for butter and cheese, and their skins provide wool and materials for garments. Goats generally provide more milk and have tougher skins. In the summer, when milk is plentiful, it is turned into butter and cheese for the long cold winter. Sheep and goats provide wool, and skins for clothes. The stomachs can be used as vessels for churning milk to butter. Animal skins are made into the traditional sheepskin fleece of the Tibetan. It is called a *lokbar*. It might take up to ten tanned goat or sheepskins to make this garment. The average fleece apparently lasts between three to four years. The underside of the sheep is used to make highly prized cashmere wool, once it has been carefully combed out.

Nomad camps with their large black tents are a common sight while driving across the plateau. Supported by a number of poles, these strong tents are made from woven yak hair. Each section is made from a number of strips sewn together. Two main sections are tied together with ropes, and slung over the poles. A gap in the roof allows smoke to exit the living area. Surprisingly, Tibetan nomads do not normally move far from a main encampment. This is partly due to the grazing areas that may encroach between nomad groups or family units, as well as saving energy otherwise needed to transport herds and people. Normally a group will set aside two grazing areas. One is for the winter, spring and summer and the other for the autumn. This ensures that the abundant summer growth is preserved for the autumn when animals need to be fattened for the coming winter of meagre grasses.



It is the women who traditionally do the milking, milk churning and cooking. They also collect water and dung, which is dried and used as a burning fuel. The men load their yaks and travel to markets with the wool, bartering for food grains and other basic items. Very few nomads hunt, as their strong Buddhist belief gives them a dislike of killing any living creature. Some men are involved in the salt trade, which may take three to four months of the year. Salt lakes are dotted across the plateau; salt is loaded on to goats and taken to trade centres. The salt caravans are active in the autumn, once the harvest for traditional farmers is over and grains are available for sale.

One such trade mart for the whole of Western Tibet and Ladakh, and as far north as Kashgar, was at Gartok. Other traders braved the high Himalayan passes from India. Early European visitors passing this place were surprised to find few permanent buildings existed and that Gartok was essentially a tented camp for trade.

The traditional nomad diet is the same as the typical Tibetan’s food, consisting basically of tsampa. This is made from roasted barley, cooked and split using hot sand. Traditionally tsampa is ground between two flat rotating stones. This may be done every couple of days to provide a fresh supply.

Tsampa is very nutritious, if a little bland. It can be eaten in different ways. When mixed with tea, it can be squeezed into dough called *ba* and eaten as it is. By adding more tea, a soupy cereal can be prepared.

A nomad normally has tea for breakfast and eats twice a day. The early lunch is a tsampa-based meal, perhaps with yoghurt. The evening meal is tsampa, but may have animal fat, meat or cheese added. The fat helps to increase calories for the cold nights. For a quick snack, it may be eaten dry. Meat is eaten more frequently in winter, as animals are slaughtered in November and December. The cold winter helps to preserve the meat.

Nomads and visitors alike consume copious amounts of tea on the plateau. The nomad likes his tea mixed with butter and salt. Rather more like soup than tea, the average visitor will find little resemblance between this tea and that taken at a Sussex tea garden in summer. The Tibetan tea comes from China in brick form, and after boiling, is churned around with salt and butter in a long tube. Rancid butter is not, in fact, a compulsory ingredient and fresher butter is normally used.

Traditionally, the women wear stunningly beautiful turquoise headdresses, though nowadays these seem to be reserved for older women and special occasions. Both sexes wear thick robes in the ice-cold winter, traditionally of sheepskin, but now all sorts of man-made fibres and Western clothing are worn too.

Customs: Birth, Marriage and Death

With special thanks to Tsering Dolkar Lama of the Hotel Tibet in Kathmandu.

Birth:

After a child is born, relatives bring gifts according to their means; clothes, food or money. Nowadays birth parties are less extravagant than in times gone by, but it is still customary to bring small gifts. When the newborn baby goes out of his home for the first time, his first visit must be straight to the Rinpoche (head lama) of his local monastery for blessing.

Marriage:

There are now three types of marriage: arranged entirely by the parents; as a result of the parents' suggestions; and love marriages, where the partners find each other and fall in love.

In all cases, once the partnership has been agreed, the boy's parents go to the girl's parents' house to ask them for her hand in marriage. Then an astrologer is called to fix the date for the engagement.

A party, fairly small but dependent on the wealth and status of the families, takes place. Then the astrologer is called again to determine the most auspicious date for the wedding.

The wedding itself is a much larger and more elaborate affair than the engagement. The timing of every single event must be determined by an astrologer; from the time the bride steps out of her parents' home to the time she crosses the threshold of her new home. Lots of monks are called to chant and pray for the happy couple. Extended family, friends and business colleagues all attend the celebrations.

When the bride and groom return to the groom's house, the mother-in-law will be waiting with a pure white undamaged cup of milk. She will sprinkle this in the air as her daughter-in-law enters her new home.

The traditional bridal costume is very beautiful but extremely heavy! The bride wears a traditional Tibetan dress in thick silk brocade, with a silk blouse underneath and a silk apron on top. Around her neck she wears a heavy turquoise star called a '*ghaou'*, its weight supported by two thick strands of necklace, including the dZi beads and other white pearl-like beads. The ghaou may be around 25cm across. Her arms are adorned with heavy gold bangles, and from her ears dangle long elaborate turquoise designs. A wooden frame is placed on her head and her hair is wound around it, to look rather like horns, decorated with more exquisite turquoise and coral.

Death:

> … Death… for us is the end of a reality and the beginning of
> a mystery…
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

There are three possibilities after death in Tibet, depending on one's status and location, i.e. whether one is close to a river, mountaintop or trees.

When someone dies, a lama must be called immediately, to ensure the safe passage of the soul to the next life. A relative will literally run to the nearest monastery to call a lama. If possible, it is better for the lama to be there at the moment of death, though this is not of course always feasible. The lama will perform P'howa, a soft blowing of air, to encourage the soul to leave through the small hole in the top of the head, the fontanelle, as is present in the skull of a newborn baby before it grows together. This P'howa can be performed from a distance, if the spiritual connection between the lama and deceased's family is very strong. Others can learn how to perform Phowa. (See Bibliography.)

An astrologer must also be called; he may or may not be a lama. Reading the charts for the deceased, he will say whether he has finished his life, whether he has lived longer than his due, or whether he has been called away to the next life too soon. He will then give an auspicious date for the cremation, which will be within five days.

Immediately after death, monks must be called in to the house. They will chant prayers incessantly until the body is cremated, so there may be several shifts of monks. All family members, friends and acquaintances must be informed as soon as possible of the death. It is considered even more important to attend someone’s funeral ceremony than to attend their marriage. In the old days immediate family members did not attend the funeral, but nowadays this has changed and most people do wish to attend when their close family members pass on.

Because there is so much organisation for a funeral, all family and extended members are given a specific task to take care of. For example, one may have to take money to all the monasteries in an area to ask the monks there to pray for the deceased. Another may organise the tea and food for the monks who are constantly in prayer for the deceased. At the cremation ground, the body is covered with a white cloth before burning. Because Tibet is critically short of wood, the dead are often bound into a sitting position, so they can be burnt on a smaller surface area and thus use less wood.

Following the ***cremation***, there are two possibilities. For a high lama, the ashes will be mixed with clay and made into tsa-tsa, then interred inside a reliquary stupa. For an ordinary person, the ashes will be taken either to a river or to a high point on top of a hill and scattered. If cremation is not possible because of a shortage of wood, the body may be chopped into small pieces by professional ‘body choppers’ and then fed to the dogs. This sort of funeral is also preceded by lamas’ prayers for the deceased. This is known as an ***Earth Funeral***.

Another method is the ***Celestial Funeral***, or ***Sky Burial***. In this case the body is chopped up and the bones are completely cleaned of flesh. They are then pounded into a paste, mixed with corn and fed to the vultures. This is considered the best way to reach the heavens.

The body is never buried underground.

Whichever type of funeral has taken place, for forty-nine days after death the soul is considered to be roaming in the Bardo, the intermediate world between life and death. Monks must come to house every week to pray. At every meal a plate of food must be laid for the deceased in his usual place at the table. On the forty-ninth day a party takes place, to celebrate the soul’s moving on to the next reincarnation.

One year later, a final party takes place.

Da Sur (a monthly puja)

Many Tibetans have a monthly puja or prayer day, on which they offer devotion to the deities in their home prayer room, requesting them to grant good fortune on the household.

This first involves the making of dough images, made from tsampa, butter and tea. The dough is rolled and moulded, and then cut into different shapes. Some are large and stupa-like, and others are smaller abstract figures. Some of the figures are painted red.

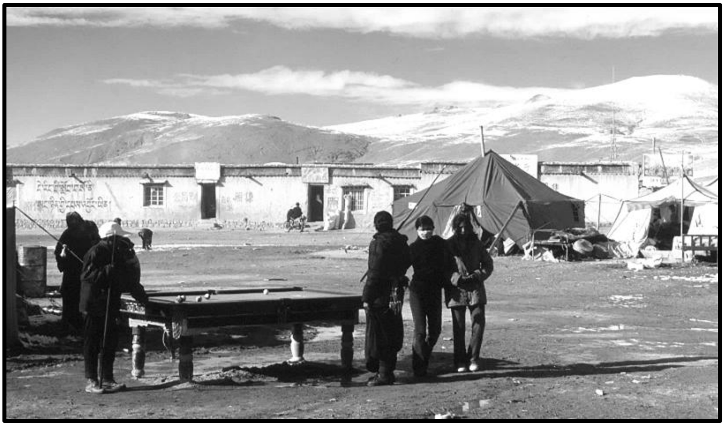
Other decorations involve the use of candle wax and butter, which are harder, and made into flowery decorations and added to the dough images.

The deities to be offered prayers are normally Guru Rinpoche, Sakyamuni Buddha and the wrathful female protector Palden Lhamo, the main deity to be propitiated. The monks who have made the images then chant prayers during the day.

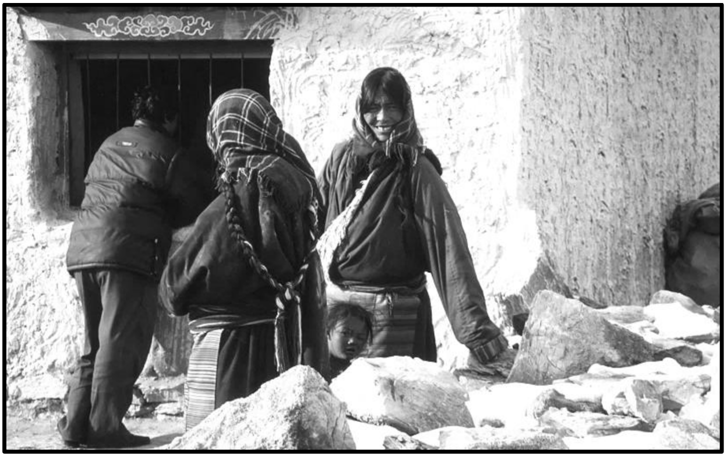
Butter lamps are left to burn and juniper incense is also burnt. Later, at an auspicious time, the dough images and decorations are discarded, thrown out to remove all the bad spirits that have collected over the last month.

And the birds have a feast day!

Tibetan lady with typical turquoise jewellery



Pot Black – Snooker players in Paryang



The local pharmacy has Tibetan medicines

Turquoise in Tibet

In Tibet, turquoise is probably the most prominent and commonly used gemstone. Seven types of turquoise are listed as typical to Tibet. These were first identified in the 17th century by Sangye Gyatso. For centuries it has been used for decoration and worn as jewellery. It is extensively apparent within Tibetan art, whether religious or decorative. Some high class ladies would wear their hair dressed as the 108 auspicious strands, with turquoise as the main decorative jewel.

Before 1950, when the Chinese overran the country, turquoise was worn to avert bad luck. In the Lhasa government, the fourth rank government officials wore a turquoise on top of their hats to denote their rank. They were responsible for day-to-day operations. The Prime Minister wore pearl, the second rank wore ruby, and the third rank coral. The fifth rank could wear any non-precious stone they liked, except those mentioned above. Although the colour of the turquoise worn may be an indication of status and wealth, most turquoise is worn for adornment. In fact most jewellery is considered auspicious in Tibet. Turquoise is considered the preferred gem for good health and prosperity. A turquoise stone is believed to guard its wearer against evil spirits, demons and the evil eye.

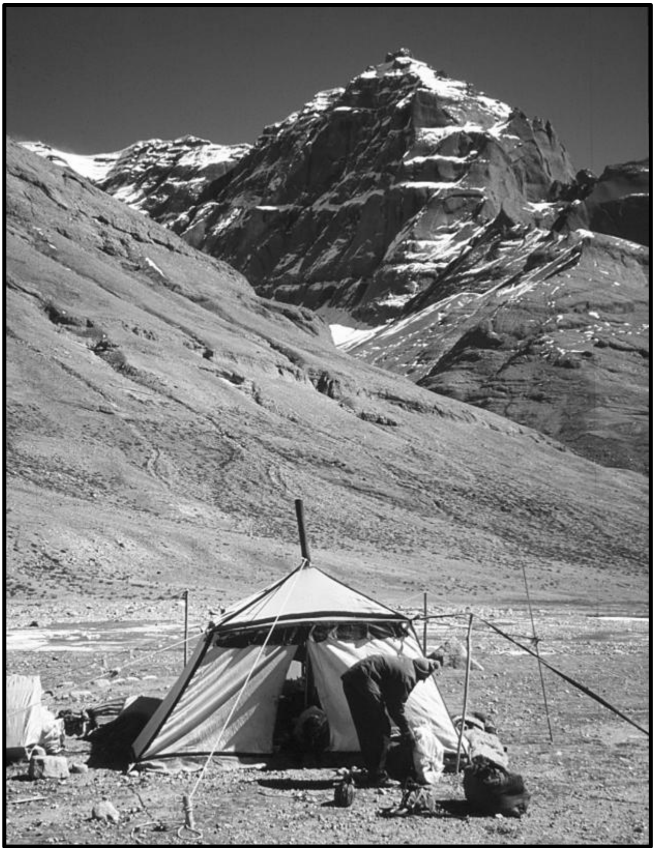
More specifically it is said to have medicinal properties, to preserve the eyesight, to protect against jaundice and liver complaints, to clean the blood and remove poisons. When a blue gem turns green, it may show that the wearer has a hidden illness. Good colour stones are thought to be living stones that are life-giving.

Certain turquoise gems are believed to help protect women in pregnancy and childbirth. Turquoise is placed on the baby’s head while auspicious verses are recited. A turquoise ear stud may strengthen bones and help prevent falls. Men often wear an ear stud of turquoise in order to stop them being reborn again as an animal, such as a donkey. Some of the Dalai Lamas of Tibet were thought to have been poisoned by the Chinese or powerful regents wanting to control and retain power. Turquoise was thought to detect the presence of poisons and was used in teacups; a change of colour would be noticed if poisons were present. Turquoise is known in Tibet as ‘Yu’. It has been considered almost as valuable as gold, which is also worked and prized locally. Because it was offered to deities and demons to avert sickness, it gained important currency. It could be said to have the colour of the supernatural. One of the more prominent deities, the green Tara, is closely associated with the greenish gem. Tara is often worshipped by her devotees using a rosary made of turquoise. Turquoise has been used in Tibet for many centuries. It is found on relics and art used by the Bonpo, the original animistic religion of Tibet before the 8th century.

Some ancient charm boxes, which act against water spirits and spirits of the soil, are vestiges of the old Bonpo. The form of Buddhism prevalent in Tibet and Nepal today is that of the Vajrayana path. This form of Buddhism stresses the male-female link, the *vajra* (the thunderbolt) and the bell being its symbols. Turquoise is also frequently used in Vajrayana art. The lotus flower and the jewel are interwoven, the jewel being of turquoise. The *ringyen* is a significant item of decorative Tibetan art. It is often made of a rounded gold amulet box with many turquoise gems making a large circular display at the centre.

Much of the best turquoise found in Tibet originates from the far west. The region of Ngari is known for its stones of a strong blue-green colour with veins of black or brown. The deep blue stones were considered the most valuable. Much of this valued turquoise was used by the local ruler, the King of Guge, to be paid as tribute to the King of Ladakh to the west. People still wear turquoise headdresses in Ladakh and Spiti, but these tend to be reserved for special occasions and festivals nowadays. In fact Leh, the capital city of Ladakh, was for generations the one of the main towns of the cross border trading routes between Persia and China. Much of the turquoise was incorporated into jewellery and metalwork. The chief centre for this craftwork was in the southern area of Tsang in Xigatse. Tibetan craftsmen are believed to have originally learnt their trade from the Newari artisans of the Kathmandu valley. There is a fascinating legend about King Srongtsen Gampo, who propagated Buddhism in Tibet. He took both a Chinese and a Nepalese wife, and in order to win the hand of his Chinese wife Princess Wengchen, he was required to pass a silk thread through a coil of perforated turquoise beads, arranged in concentric circles. He cleverly tied the thread to a queen ant and placed her in the middle of the circle. Then, by blowing gently, he caused her to go through the beads one by one until she came out of the other end with the thread attached.

Another legend describes Tibet in glorious terms: At the foot of the giant mountains supporting the sky, lakes and flowing streams gather, forming plains of the appearance of turquoise, and glittering pyramids of snow-clad crystal rise. This mountain range, spreading like a thousand lotus flowers, is white and like crystal during the three winter months; during the three months of the summer it is azure blue; during the three months of the autumn it is yellow like gold; and in the moons of the spring striped like the skin of the tiger. Looking back over the last hundred years, the trend has been generally to wear less ornate jewellery. When the Chinese first arrived in 1950, they banned the wearing of such ornaments, citing them as being mediaeval practices not in keeping with communism. In Tibet of today and elsewhere, turquoise has once again surfaced as the gemstone of choice, albeit in less extravagant forms.



Nomad camp and pilgrim

CHAPTER SIX

Festivals

Tibetan calendar

Based on the lunar year, the Tibetan calendar consists of twelve months of thirty days each, in theory. To make this match up with the solar year of 365¼ days, an extra month is added every third year. This is not added at any fixed point, but at an auspicious time determined by an astrologer. Another problem is that the actual lunar year is made up of only 354 days, not the theoretical 360 days, so further adjustments have to be made by cutting out certain days. Other days may be repeated, just adding to the confusion.

The actual Tibetan year begins in February or March, with the new moon. The months have no names, only numbers one to twelve, but the days of the week are named after the planets, and the years are named after animals, repeating every twelve years. And in 1027AD, a sixty-year cycle was introduced. This is made up of five cycles of twelve years, each cycle named after the five elements: wood, fire, earth, iron and water.

One of the most important part of the festivals is the Cham dance. These dances are choreographed in great detail, and are performed by the lamas in incredible costumes, while an orchestra of monks plays the drums, long horns and cymbals. Each of these dances has a theme, which is to show the destruction of evil and demonstrate the illusory nature of life. They also make offerings to the tutelary deities and yidams of each monastery.

Some of the masks are fierce, one might even say grotesque, not the sort of face you would want to meet on a dark night. Others might have the peaceful countenance of a benign Buddha. They usually represent Buddhist gods and characters from Tibetan fables. The more fierce ones normally represent guardians or protectors in their wrathful Tantric form. When not being used for the festival dances, these masks are often stored in the Gonkhang of each monastery and you may see them hanging on the pillars if you’re lucky.

The dances are usually held in the courtyard of the monastery, around a specially erected flagpole. Holding sacred objects in their hands, the lamas mime to the deeply resonant sombre music that is so spiritually uplifting for them and for any listener, tourist or otherwise. To lighten the experience, in between dances a masked jester might appear and invite one of the audience to take part in a 'clown' sequence, poking gentle fun at the unsuspecting participant and making everybody laugh. This is also a feature of the Mani Rimdu festival at Tengboche below Everest in Nepal where a goblin-like figure, an old man called Mi Tsering, is seen. In Tibet he is often called Cagan Obo.

Most of the festivals last for two or three days, starting on the first day with prayers for the safe proceeding of the festival. After the dances, effigies are burnt to signify the destruction of evil spirits.

Losar New Year

The Tibetan New Year is normally celebrated some time in February, depending on the phase of the moon. It normally lasts three days, and is celebrated by Tibetans worldwide. In Ladakh it is celebrated two months earlier than in other Tibetan communities. This has happened since the 16th century, when King Jamyang Namgyal had to lead a winter expedition into enemy territory, and was advised by his astrologer that it would be unwise to do so without celebrating the New Year first.

Losar dancers

The most important of Tibetan celebrations, Losar consists of a complex mix of Bon and Buddhist rituals. The Bon originally burnt large amounts of incense as offerings to the earth spirits, deities and the protectors. Later Buddhists adopted the festival. Once the harvest is over, people start to stock up for the festival, with grain, sheep and goats. People also like to have new clothes and jewellery.

On New Year's Day itself, people make offerings at the shrines of their own personal gods in the company of close family and relatives. The second day is usually when people visit other friends at their houses, presenting gifts and the white scarves known as *khata* (as in Nepal). Normally new prayer flags are erected and incense burnt in profusion. On the third day, masked dances take place. This is also the day of the dough balls divination, when balls of dough are thrown in such a way as to enhance good fortunes or well being for the nation, the Dalai Lama and the Buddha. In Bon monasteries, the dances usually take place on New Year's Eve.

Such general festivities can last a week or more, and some people get married at this time.

Formerly the Dalai Lama in Lhasa used to offer torma cakes to the protecting deities on the first day known as Lama Losar. The head lamas of the great monastic colleges gathered at the Potala. The second day in official circles was reserved for guests and dignitaries to attend, and the third day was when the Cham dances took place, to appease the protecting deities, including Palden Lhamo.

In many places at the end of the celebrations, processions of people march through the towns, sometimes carrying flaming torches, which are waved through the air, creating fantastic patterns of fire and light. They chant prayers to scare away the ghosts and evil spirits that have built up over the year because of the bad karma and wrongdoing of the people. The end of Losar symbolises the end of the old year and the start of a 'new beginning'.

Bon Losar New Year in Kathmandu

The Bon have their own distinct festivities. At Triten Norbutse Bon Monastery in Kathmandu we witnessed the following ceremony:

After some prayers in the main dukhang, and large bowls of meat and vegetable stew for all the monks, the celebrations began in earnest. Monks blowing long horns, perhaps three metres in length, trumpeted the entrance of the masked dancers. Two aspects of Sipa'i Gyalmo led the procession; each had a fearsome three-eyed face garlanded with skulls. The main one had a peacock feather head decoration. The following deities were the protector deities, although this can vary according to the particular Cham dance chosen for the day. Next came a blue-faced, benign-looking image, the Blue Namse (Zambhala Gonpo), leading the rest of the dancers. Of three white-faced deities, two had benevolent attitudes; one wore a dome-shaped helmet, he was Nyipangse, the guardian of Shangshung. The other had a strange hat, which looked like the icing on a Christmas cake; name unknown, but possibly another aspect of Nyipangse.

A third, called Menmo, a female deity, wore a more sinister face. She is a healer. The black-hatted deity has his face concealed by a long black fringe, above which is a fearsome mask. This deity is associated with Palgyi Dorje, the slayer of King Langdarma. A single dancer had no mask, but had a large cymbal-like helmet on his head, and simple costume; no brocade robes.

Another dancer was the wild and aggressive, red-faced, three-eyed protector, Apse, adding to the excitement. Wearing brightly decorated brocaded gowns of many colours, and three-eyed black aprons, the dancing figures created an impressive sight. To the sound of the orchestra, drums, cymbals and horns, they danced in a trance for nearly one hour around the central pole, a tree in this case, swirling around at such high speed it made one dizzy just watching them.

The culmination of the dance happened when a red tsampa (dough) image, shaped like a human body and representing the demons of ignorance, desire and bad spirits, was shot by one of the Sipa'i Gyalmo deities with a bow and arrow. This signified the death of ignorance, dispelling the negative human emotions. The dough image was then cut up and given to each of the dancers, who continued to hold the pieces in their skull cups as they danced around the pole. Later it was apparently eaten by the monks. The consumption of the 'evil' turned to good helps to re-invigorate those who eat it. The dancers then retreated and the next ceremony began.

The monks and all the visitors gathered in a large circle. Two very long threads of blue and red were passed around, and each person in the congregation wrapped it around their finger. The chief officiating monk then passed around the large gathering, cutting the threads so that each person had a short piece of the thread. Soon after, each person, monk and visitor alike, passes the 'spirit trap' or 'castle of tormas', a silk-covered box containing many tormas. This spirit trap is a house for benevolent spirits to gather. They are sometimes found on mountain passes to protect travellers. Each person was blessed with saffron water by the officiating monk as they cast their thread into a vessel containing a tsampa-moulded human image. Further dances them took place, with the monks, now wearing blue and white hats, forming a large circle around the courtyard. Once the dancing was concluded, worshippers returned to the torma castle and presented silk khatas, touching their heads reverently to the castle.

Finally the monks left with great fanfare, taking the 'castle' with them. The tormas were later tossed out and with them all negativity was banished for another year.

Close to Spiti, the **New Year** celebrations at New Menri Bon Monastery outside Shimla are also impressive. Masked dances are the main attraction, and the themes vary here according to Bon traditions and not Buddhist. The masks of the Khyung bird and, in particular, of Sipa'i Gyalmo in differing animal-headed aspects, are very spectacular.

Losar festivities today vary considerably throughout the Tibetan region. In Ladakh, for example, a popular custom is to make drawings of ibex on walls, doors and columns. The ibex is regarded as a symbol of fertility and prosperity for the family. Models of ibex are also moulded from dough and placed on kitchen shelves.

Great Monlam festival

Formerly in Lhasa the Great Monlam festival was celebrated (and still has been in some years). When it takes place, it runs from the 8th to 15th day of the first Tibetan month. Originally this festival celebrated the victory of the Buddha over six Brahmin preachers. Later Tsong Khapa initiated the Monlam festival in 1409. Traditionally there were great gatherings (of thousands) of monks from Drepung, Sera, Ganden, Gongkar and six or seven other smaller monasteries close to Lhasa. This in recent years has made the festival a possible political flashpoint.

Saga Dawa

This is the main festival that visitors are likely to witness within the region of Kailash. Celebrated throughout Tibet, this festival occurs on the fifteenth day of the fourth lunar month. Celebrations are in observance of the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. The principal activity at Mount Kailash centres on the erecting of the Tarboche flagpole. The pole must be set exactly vertical and correctly to ensure good luck for the year. Pilgrims gather here for the festival and camp for three or four days. Most visit the cremation grounds of the eighty-four Mahasiddhas.

Dalai Lama's birthday

Celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth Tibetan month, the birthday of the Dalai Lama is commonly recognised as being on 06 July. The Dalai Lama was born in the Amdo region of Tibet northeast of Lhasa at Taktser, some time in March 1940.

Shoton Yoghurt Festival

This festival takes place on the thirtieth day of the sixth month. On this day monks observe a vegetarian diet and make three commitments to the coming season's retreat. This festival is celebrated throughout the main monasteries of Lhasa, at the Norbu Lingka and at Drepung, where a large scroll is unrolled. Operas form part of the festivities, which continue until the fifth day of the seventh month.

Tsong Khapa's birthday

This celebrates the birthday and Buddhahood of Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Gelug-pa sect. It also commemorates the victory of good over evil. It is an important social as well as religious festival. Today it is celebrated at different times across the Tibetan lands. Most commonly it is before the New Year. All public and residential buildings are illuminated, as well as the monasteries. Every household prepares the traditional food of 'thukpa', a hearty soup, to serve to visiting guests.

The festival lasts two days, during which time the lamas dance wearing the masks of the Dharmapala guardians and patron saints of the Gelug-pa sect. On the last day a human figure made from dough is 'sacrificed', being dismembered with ritual weapons; this process is the killing of the enemy. The pieces are then thrown away in all four cardinal directions, symbolising the banishment of all enemies as well as the assassination of King Langdarma by a Buddhist monk (see History).

Guru Rinpoche's Birthday

The tenth day of every Tibetan month is considered auspicious, and in particular, those of the fifth and tenth months are considered especially so, being celebrated as the birthday of Guru Rinpoche.

The festival occurs throughout Tibet, Nepal and at Hemis, in Ladakh, where it is particularly famous, being 200 years old. In essence, the celebrations and any dances show the eight forms of Guru Rinpoche/Padma Sambhava vanquishing the enemies of Buddhism and ensuring its survival and growth. He is revered for having tamed and converted the pre-Buddhist Bon deities to Buddhism. Every twelve years the Hemis festival is even more special, as a two-storey-high thangka of Guru Rinpoche is unveiled.

Ladakh has a whole series of festivals. Unlike Tibet, where there are restrictions concerning some festivals, Ladakh has become one of the main places to observe traditional Himalayan Buddhist festivals. Some are held in winter, like the Spituk Tse-chu and the Thikse Gu-Stor. In summer thousands of spectators and pilgrims congregate at the Hemis festival. The Cham dances that celebrate the 'victory' of Buddhism over Bon are the main attractions.

Traditional Tibetan and other festivals (many Hindu) are also celebrated in ebullient style across Nepal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exploring the Tantric Mountain

The Kailash region

> To see the greatness of a mountain, one must keep one's distance, to understand its form, one must move around it; to experience its moods, one must see it at sunrise and sunset, at noon and at midnight, in sun and in rain, in snow and in storm, in summer and in winter and in all the other seasons. He who can see the mountains like this comes near to the life of the mountain, a life that is as intense and varied as that of a human being.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

Mount Kailash

Kailash is a spectacular sight from any angle. Standing at a height of 6714m (22028ft), the near-perfect peak is like a sparkling crystal. Most pilgrims consider each face to be mirrored by a precious jewel. The south is commonly called the sapphire face. The east is the crystal face, and the west face is of the ruby, the red side. The north is the gold face, a colour it adopts at sunrise and sunset. The striking location and design of the mountain inspire any visitor. However, most are drawn to the mountain by its holy significance.

Hinduism: Mountain of Shiva

> Those who follow Shiva tread strange paths and see strange visions. Shiva is a divine thriller. The path to Shiva is a mountain ride that jolts the seeker, pitching him into high altitude conditions that leave him breathless with the euphoria of dread… Shiva batters his devotee, blows his mind and boggles his imagination. Scaling the heights of Kailash, the sights and sounds that greet him are not calculated to soothe. The seeker needs to brace himself to hear the sounds, as he needs to steel himself for the first vision of Shiva…
> ***Shiva, Eye of the Storm*, Lakshmi Lal**

There are, so far as we are aware, no Hindus living in Tibet. But Mount Kailash is sacred to Hindus, and hundreds or perhaps thousands of them make the sometimes-perilous journey each year to walk around its base, or around the holy Lake Manasarovar, so a discussion of Hinduism is relevant here. Buddha is regarded as the ninth avatar of Vishnu, the Hindu god who is the preserver. Also, Mount Kailash is considered to be Shiva's palace; see below.

Kailash has been considered a holy mountain since long before Christ. It is mentioned in the great Indian texts (puranas) and epics, the Mahabharat and the Ramayana. In these texts Mount Meru is covered in luxuriant forests, flowers and golden dwellings. According to Hindu mythology, Mount Kailash is the earthly image of Mount Meru, the spiritual centre of the world. Everything in the cosmos revolves around it; the sun, the moon and the stars. The base of the mountain lies in hell and the top reaches up to heaven. The mountain is also considered to be the navel of the earth.

The Ramayana, written over five hundred years before Christ, mentions a lake as well. It also claims that the god of death was living on Kailash. The Vishnu Purana mentions a mighty peak, giving it some wildly exaggerated dimensions. It also says that above Mount Meru is the city of the god Brahma, the creator. In mythology the mountain is enclosed by the river Ganges which, near a place called the foot of Vishnu, divides into four rivers. Other references are found in the Matsya, Padma, Bhagavata, Vayu and Skanda Puranas.

In essence the ideas of Hinduism are based upon the idea that everything in the universe is connected, and that one action anywhere will cause another to occur, maybe elsewhere. This is, in terms of people, called Karma. It means that one should be continually aware of one's deeds in life being the instrument of further reaction. In the endless cycle of rebirth, one should strive to be a better person in this life. Bad Karma leads to a lower class/caste for the next life.

The Hindu gods are all one, though for simplification they are worshipped as a trinity of three principal gods; Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. Each of these is subdivided into innumerable others; each is venerated for a different aspect of the life cycle.

A Legend of Shiva at Kailash

Shiva was in meditation but had no son. So the gods sent a daughter of the Himalaya, Parvati to seduce him. But she had not gained his favour even after a thousand years, so the god of love, Kama, shot an arrow at Shiva to arouse him from deep meditation. In anger Shiva foresaw this, and using his third, flaming eye, burnt Kama to ashes. But he was too late, as the arrow had already hit him. Then nearby he saw Parvati and sure enough, he fell in love. A son was born of this love, to save the world from evil, named Karttikeya (Kumar).

Shiva is the cosmic male. His sex organ is the lingam, represented in this case by the shape of Mount Kailash. The Ganges River represents the flow of energy from heaven to earth. It descends from the head of Shiva, at Mount Kailash. Lake Manasarovar is the cosmic female. In Bon and Buddhism, the yab-yum of Tibet is similar. Everything comes from the union of generative forces, from the sacred couple.

Hindus consider Kailash to be the throne of Shiva, and the mighty gash on its southern face the staircase to heaven. Shiva sits in the lotus position on the lofty peak with his consort Parvati. The mythical river Ganges is said to tumble from its summit. The river then mysteriously disappears from sight, carried by strands of Shiva's hair, re-emerging on the Indian side of the Himalaya near Gangotri.

Hindus believe that a sprinkling of the water of the holy lake Manasarovar on their heads, and perhaps a drop or two passing their lips, will protect them from harm; and the walk around Mount Kailash, the *parikrama*, will forgive all their past sins. Many of them are elderly pilgrims from the south of India, at low altitude and extreme heat as opposed to high altitude and extreme cold. But they are prepared to risk their lives to come here, for if they die here they will go straight to heaven.

Another Hindu legend of Kailash

Kumar is the warrior god, a son of Shiva. Legend has it that when demons vanquished Indra from his throne, Vishnu declared that nothing would happen until a son was born of Shiva and Parvati. The god of fire, Agni, disguised as a beggar, was sent to Shiva's palace on Mount Kailash in Tibet. But Agni interrupted the lovemaking of Shiva and his consort. Shiva was furious at this disturbance, but as he was about to send flames from his third eye to destroy Agni, Parvati intervened. Shiva, in anger, ejected his semen into the beggar's hand, and he swallowed it. Then, engulfed with burning, Agni vomited the semen out and into the river Ganges, whereupon a son known as Kumar was born. Kumar annihilated the demons, and Indra was reinstalled.

The Himalaya have always been the abode of Gods, and none more so than Kailash.

> There is no sin in the world which cannot be destroyed by circumambulation. Hence one should dispel all sins by circumambulation alone.
> ***Shiva Purana***

Jainism: Mountain of Asthapada

Mount Kailash is known by the Jains as Mount Asthapada or Padma Harada. The mountain is said to be the place where the first Jain prophet or founder (known as the tirthankaras) of holy sites first achieved enlightenment, or nirvana. The first Tirthankara was Adinath Rasbhanatha (Rasbha). Adinath means ‘first master’. The first twenty-two Tirthankaras are effectively mythical figures born from stories and legends.

According to such legends, Adinath Rasbha was born in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, a town that remains a place of holy pilgrimage for Hindus, Jains and Muslims today. He took two wives, Yasasvati and Sunanda, and had a son called Bharata. At first Rasbha ruled with a strong hand, but after several thousand years he realised that all life which becomes mundane is transitory. So he began preaching and teaching. After thousands of years he finally retired to Mount Asthapada (Kailash), taking with him ten thousand monks. Finally, after six and a half days of fasting, he passed into Nirvana. The gods cremated him, and this is said to be the first use of fire to aid the body to move on to the spiritual world. Later his son, Bharata, erected a temple to Rasbha on Mount Asthapada.

The Jains believe that religion can neither be created nor destroyed, it just is.

Jains, Hindus and Buddhists all believe in karma, the idea that any action, even thought, will produce a reaction. They believe that all-living things have a soul. This never dies. However, they consider that the mind and matter are separate and remain differentiated. When the soul is freed, one can reach for nirvana. The soul must be freed from exchanges, including thoughts, to find peace. This means that all senses, all karmic effects and all matter have to be dispersed or eliminated in order to find the inner peace in which the soul is unfettered and shines in ‘infinite splendour’. According to the Jains, the world has three levels. The gods are found in the Upper World, the place where all living things reside is the Middle World, and the Lower World is the abode of the demons.

Many of the fundamental ideas of the religion differ only moderately from Buddhist concepts, but Jains trace their ideals back to two human figures. These are Parsva and Mahavira. Parsva is probably the figure who first adopted the above ideas of Jain philosophy. He is considered as the 23rd tirthankara and the first to have a human connection. He was of noble birth and was born in Varanasi.

Mahavira, which means ‘great hero’, is the twenty-fourth and last of the Jain tirthankaras. He is definitely a human character, because he is mentioned in other texts and scripts. He was born near modern-day Patna, the son of King Siddhartha, (not to be confused with his contemporary Gautama Siddhartha, the earthly Buddha). He led a normal life and was married until aged twenty-eight. Then, much like the Buddha, he renounced all comforts and pleasures to become a roaming soul. He meditated and wandered without any clothing for twelve years. After this time he reached a state of great knowledge and further promulgated the teachings of Parsva. Having preached with great influence for thirty years, he died. Mahavira adopted very austere practices, including long periods of fasting, but his teachings profoundly affected the population of the day. His ascetic ways and charismatic words encouraged thousands to follow his path.

A legend about Mount Asthapada

Ajita became the second tirthankara and ruled the land known as Bharata (India). He and his retinue of family and followers came upon Mount Asthapada one day. Seeing the great wealth represented by the jewels of the great temple built on the mountain by Bharata, son of Rasbha, they realised that such riches may easily be stolen by immoral people. They set about to dig a trench all around the mountain. (This may perhaps be a reference in legend to the path of the Kora.) The trench was dug using diamonds, but in doing so they upset the spirits of the underworld. Initially the Serpent King forgave them for this, as he realised that they had good intentions. One of Ajita's followers, Jahnu, continued and flooded the trench with Ganga water. This upset the serpent king profoundly, and in revenge he burned all the followers.

A nephew of Ajita, Sagara, escaped this destruction and wanted to make amends for all the horrors. One day he met a Brahmana (a wise Brahmin), who assured him that no one, good or evil, could escape death. So Sagara sent his grandson Bhagiratha to Asthapada to stop the great flood of Ganga water. The Ganga was controlled, the underworld spirits were placated and Bhagiratha joined Ajita and Sagara in Nirvana.

As with nearly all the great religions of the world, different interpretations of the teachings led to the creation of two sects within Jainism. The differences are not that significant, but nonetheless conflicts have arisen in dogma and ideology. The two schisms of Jains are known as the Svetambaras and the Digambaras. Simply put, this break occurred over discipline and purity. The Svetambaras are the followers of Parsva, who originally began wearing thin white cloth and still follow this trend. Those who followed the example of Mahavira did not wear clothes, being dressed in air. These followers are called the Digambaras. This took place almost two thousand years ago, in about 80AD. Today the strict dogmas have largely died out, but the two sects still exist.

The mythical interpretations of the Jains bear some resemblance to Hindu mythology in many respects, but this may not be so surprising, since little authentic literature can be produced to corroborate any of the earliest historical facts. To differentiate between Hindu and Jain pilgrims on the Kora as a foreign visitor is difficult. Jain pilgrims may often be seen carrying a bag containing prayer beads.

Buddhism: Mountain of Demchok

> Who can put into words a landscape that breathes this immensity? – where vast blue lakes, set in emerald-green pastures and golden foothills, are seen against a distant range of snow mountains, in the centre of which rises the dazzling dome of Kailash, the 'Jewel of the Snows', as the Tibetans call the holy mountain.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

For Buddhists, Mount Kailash, which they call Kang Rinpoche, is a revered chorten, a precious jewel of the snows and a cosmic mandala. Also known as either Mount Sumeru or Mount Meru, reference to this peak is found on Buddhist shrines as far away as Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Java, Indonesia. Buddhists also consider two other mountains as sacred pilgrimage places. These are Lapchi Kang, north of Gauri Shankar in Nepal, and Tsari, which is north of Bhutan.

The guardian deity of the peak is called Demchok, who is often depicted in Tantric pose, yab-yum with Dorje Phagmo (Parvati and also Vajra Varahi, the boar-headed goddess of Hindus). She resides on Mount Tijung, which is the small snow-covered tower to the west of Kailash. Together they create compassion and wisdom for enlightenment.

To walk around the peak and cross the Drolma La is to obliterate the sins of a lifetime. To walk or prostrate around the mountain is to find the path of enlightenment. After thirteen such koras one can proceed to the Inner Kora and circle the great monolithic slab known as Neten Yenlakzung (Nandi by Hindus), which sits directly in front of the east side of the southern face.

> Before the valley turns to the northeast is a rock rising thousands of feet sheer from the bottom of the valley, shaped like the sacred Nandi bull, with its head raised towards the summit of Kailash, as if looking lovingly at its master.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

Guru Rinpoche, the Tantric magician who came to Tibet in the eighth century, is believed to have meditated in the cave close to Chuku Monastery known as Pemaphug. He is also said to have visited the burial grounds of the mountain.

The presence of Guru Rinpoche, along with the Nyingma-pa and Kagyu-pa Tantric traditions, encircle the mountain, giving it a cloak of esoteric dew.

Tibetan legend has it that Kailash was once a black mountain with a crystal temple on the summit, which had nine levels. This gives us a direct comparison with the Bon.

Legend of Kailash

The guardian of the black hill was also known as the black lord, Gonpo Pung. One day he got angry, because too many pilgrims were visiting the holy crystal stupa on the summit of the peak, having completed their own kora. So he tried to move Kailash away from the commotion into the serpent world below. The Buddha heard about these troubles while in meditation at Bodhgaya, and he went to the mountain at once. He took with him five hundred disciples, and together they stopped Gonpo Pung from absconding with Mount Kailash. They then placed footprints of Buddha around the peak to stop the theft. They later cast snow on to the summit, so that no one could ever again tread on its holy crown.

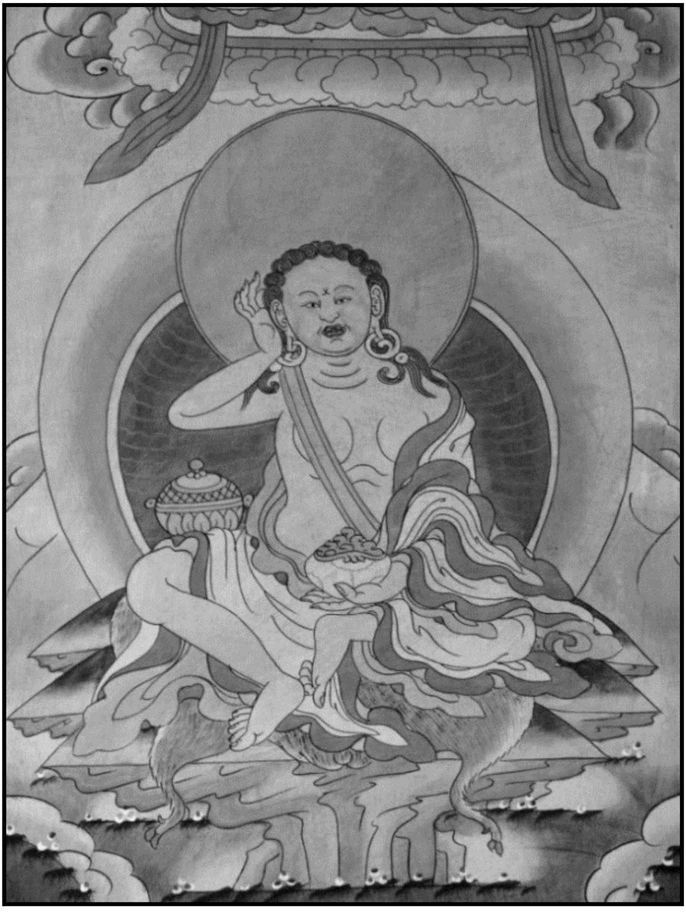
Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims follow the conventional direction, clockwise around the Kailash Kora.

> The prophecy of Buddha says most truly,
> That this snow mountain is the navel of the world,
> A place where the snow leopards dance.
> The mountain top, the crystal-like pagoda,
> Is the white and glistening palace of Demchog…
> This is the great place of accomplished yogis;
> Here one attains transcendent accomplishments.
> There is no place more wonderful than this,
> There is no place more marvellous than here.
> **Milarepa**

The poet, ascetic and hermit, Milarepa is, according to legends, the defender of Kailash for the Buddhist faithful. Some of his legendary fights with the Bon shaman deity, Naro Bonchung took place in the vicinity of the valley and again at the Zutrulphuk Monastery. The final magical contest, according to legends, concluded on the summit of Kailash, with Naro Bonchung falling off. His drum was said to have gorged out the step-like features on the south face. The vanquished Bonpo was given a mountain near Lake Manasarovar on which to reside. This peak, east of Kailash, is referred to by some as Mount Bon Ri (not to be confused with another mountain in Eastern Tibet also sacred to Bonpo).

Milarepa and the Black Magician

A Bon-po priest once challenged Milarepa to a race to reach the summit of Kailash. Milarepa accepted, and the race was scheduled for first thing in the morning. The Bon-po priest set off, while Milarepa sat and relaxed. His supporters were worried as the black magician approached the summit, and told Milarepa to hurry up. But Milarepa had other ideas. When the first ray of sun touched the summit of the holy mountain and the ground, Milarepa became one with it and shot instantaneously up the sunbeam to the summit. ‘Hello,’ he called down to the black priest. He was so shocked that he dropped his drum, which tumbled down the mountain, bouncing and leaving step marks in the rock, forming the axis of the swastika on the southern side of the mountain.



Milarepa

Milarepa was an historical figure, around whom many legends have grown up. His ‘Hundred Thousand Songs’ is a great poetic legacy. Before he achieved realisation, he suffered all the highs and lows of human existence; being first a disciple and follower of Buddha, he later became a Buddha himself.

Hindus generally identify Milarepa with Shiva, perhaps because both are white-haired ascetics with lean white bodies. Milarepa is sometimes considered to be green because of his diet of nettles, which he used to cook in his earthenware pot. But one day the pot fell and was broken. Milarepa simply accepted this as a sign of the impermanence of all worldly things and was happy to be freed from his last attachment.

Nettles are still a staple of the poor and grow abundantly around Kailash. So pilgrims are constantly reminded of Milarepa as they do the kora.

> The way of the world is illusion:
> I strive after true reality.
> To be moved by earthly possessions is illusion:
>
> I endeavour to rise above duality.
> To be the world’s servant is illusion:
> I wander in the mountains alone.
> Wealth and possessions are illusion:
>
> I renounce for the sake of the faith any I may have.
> External things are illusion:
> I contemplate the mind.
> Distinctive thought is illusion:
>
> I follow after sapience.
> Conditional truth is illusion:
> I dispose the absolute truth.
> The printed book is illusion:
> I meditate upon the counsels of the ear-whispered tradition.
> ...
> The delight of mental thought is illusion:
> I dwell in the state of reality.
> ***The Message of Milarepa*, trans. by Sir Humphrey Clarke**

Bon: Mountain of Tonpa Shenrab

Mount Kailash is known by the Bonpo as Yungdrung Gutse, often translated as the nine-storey swastika mountain. The mountain lies at the centre of the ancient Bon territory known as Shangshung and is held to be one of its focal points. It is believed by some scholars that the origins of the Bon were further to the east in Tajik lands, and that the Bon culture might have come from a place called Olmolungring. Others have found evidence of the Bon ideas in northern Pakistan.

The Bon regard the mountain as the dwelling place of Ku Lha Gekho, another protective deity, also known as Welchen Gekho and Nyipangse. His consort was Logbar Tsame, who guards the Dzogchen teachings. Nyipangse was supposedly subdued by the Bon mystic, Gyerpung Drenpa Namkha. Kailash is also called Tise, the seat of a mountain spirit called Tise Lhatsen, who is a Shen deity. The ruins of an ancient Bon monastery are found just east of Kailash.

The Bon have a legend in which their founder, Tonpa Shenrab, descended to earth from heaven via Mount Kailash. The space above the peak represents the nine zones in the Lha Yul, heavenly sector of the universe. The sun, moon and stars are sources of veneration in this zone. The Khyung bird resides in the heavens, as do a number of fearful deities. A wrathful version of the Khyung bird, with a body of iron and talons of copper, is Khyung Ka. Among the feared deities are the Mu, who cause illness. It is interesting to note that one of the four original tribes of the Tibetan race were called *Mu*, who lived in the west. Tonpa Shenrab and King Nyatri Tsenpo, an early king of Tibet, are both considered to be descendants of the *Mu*.

Kailash itself also has nine stacked levels of the middle zone or *Mi Yul*. Some deities who reside in this area are the *Shen* (Tsen) and *Nyen*. These and other local deities are found on passes, mountains, in gorges and all places of human habitation. This partly explains the placing of rocks and prayer flags on passes and high points.

Below the peak are a further nine levels known as the lower zone or *Og Yul*. The spirits of this zone are the *Lu* and were born from eggs. These are the rain-giving deities, who can also reside in the *Mi Yul*. However, these benign givers can also hand down diseases. The Khyung bird can dispose of these *Lu* deities when the need arises.

The *Sa dag* spirits who inhabit the earth are also of the lower zone. These spirits must be offered devotions before houses can be built or fields cultivated. It could be these spirits who gave rise to the ancient Tibetan practice of not harming any animals, including worms and earth dwellers. The wheel too was never used and thus the ground was never disturbed. Sky burials also avoid disturbance of the earth.

The underworld also hosts the feared *sinpo nodjin* and *dre* spirits. Many of the deities of the Bon have been absorbed into the Buddhist hierarchy of gods and deities now.

A Bon legend

Yarlha Shampo (and nearby Khula Kangri) is a mountain north of Bhutan and south of Samye monastery; it is another mountain sacred to the Bon. In the duels between the Bon and the Buddhists, Yarlha Shampo is a Bon deity who once took the form of a white man. In this guise he made the widow of King Drigung pregnant after her husband had been murdered. The widowed wife then gave birth to the one who would avenge this murder. This deity was presumed to be the ancestor of the Pugyel Kings who first ruled Tibet. Yarlha Shampo was said to have been subdued later by Tantric Guru Rinpoche in a magical contest. Despite being disguised as a white yak, Yarlha Shampo lost the contest when Guru Rinpoche covered him with a magic cloak. And so the Bon deity was converted to Buddhism!

Bon pilgrims can easily be discerned, because they follow the Kora path in an anti-clockwise direction. This makes it harder, for the climb to the Drolma La is longer and steeper.

Kailash: Mountain of Adventure

The rumours of a sacred mountain in Tibet called Kailash spread across the world many years ago, but Tibet itself remained very isolated. Few could actually point out its position of the map. The Jesuit Antonio de Andrade entered Tibet in 1624 but did not venture much beyond the Guge Kingdom west of the mountain. Very likely the first European visitors to the mountain were Ippolito Desideri and Manuel Freyra, both Jesuit missionaries. They crossed western Tibet in 1715 and saw Kailash. Freyra returned to India, while Desideri continued east to Lhasa.

He did not linger long in Guge, and he also passed quickly by Kailash, which he described as the mountain of Urghien. This name relates to Padma Sambhava, who some believe was a native of Urgyan, which is located in the Swat valley region of northern Pakistan. Desideri arrived at Lake Manasarovar, which he claims was a source of gold dust. He continued east and on to Lhasa, where he arrived in1716. Curiously, he left Tibet via Nilam (modern-day Nyalam) to Kathmandu. He died in India in 1733.

The first English visitor was in 1812; a vet called William Moorcroft. Crossing the mountains from India, he located Lake Manasarovar but merely noted the grandeur of Kailash. He noted that Darchen at the time comprised of merely four houses. Moorcroft spent a lot of time in Gartok before returning to India by way of Tirthapuri and Khyunglung along the Sutlej. Henry Strachey, another English pioneer, visited in 1846.

The celebrated Japanese explorer Ekai Kawaguchi, disguised as a monk, spent three years in Tibet and also visited the mountain. In fact he undertook the Kailash Kora sometime between 1897 when he left Japan and 1903 he arrived back. At the time of his visit, he said of the Nyenri Gompa and the western valley:

> *The image of Buddha Amitabha, as enshrined in the temple, is made of a white lustrous stone.*
>
> *there are several fantastic rocks of great size towering far into the sky, while beyond them peeps the snow-clad summit of the peak Tise.*

Another famous visitor to the region was the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, who passed through in 1907 during one of his celebrated journeys to Tibet and Central Asia.

With ever improving roads and communications, Mount Kailash will one day become more accessible, for even today it remains a four-day drive or a week-long trek (from Simikot in Nepal). Trekking around the mountain will never be an easy task, as the altitude lies between 4,500m and 5,636m. The future fame of Kailash is assured, but the near pristine environment in which it stands today may not exist for much longer.

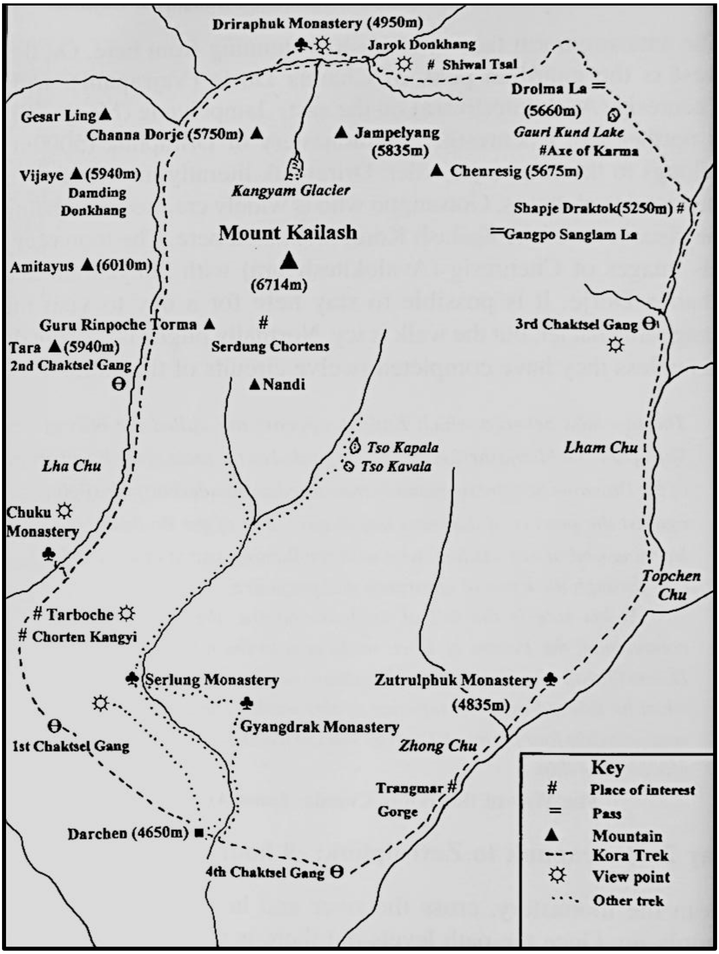
> The power of such a mountain is so great and yet so subtle that, without compulsion, people are drawn to it from near and far, as if by the force of some invisible magnet; and they will undergo untold hardships and privations in their inexplicable urge to approach and to worship the centre of this sacred power.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

> Nobody can approach the Throne of the Gods… without risking his life – and perhaps even the sanity of his mind. He who performs the Parikrama, the ritual circumambulation of the holy mountain, with perfectly devoted and concentrated mind, goes through a full cycle of life and death.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

Kailash Kora Trek

Trekking around the Kailash Kora today is less hazardous with a little care, a lot of preparation and exercising of common sense. The approach to the highest point, the Drolma La pass, may well seem like death on earth at times, but the thrill of the summit will totally overwhelm even the lowest of spirits, human or otherwise. A brief summary of the route is given below. For more details consult our Cicerone guide. The Kailash Kora is known to Hindus as the **Kailash Parikrama.** Four Chaktsel Gang sites exist where Tibetan pilgrims prostrate themselves before the mountain. The Shapje - Buddha footprints - appear at three places on the circuit.

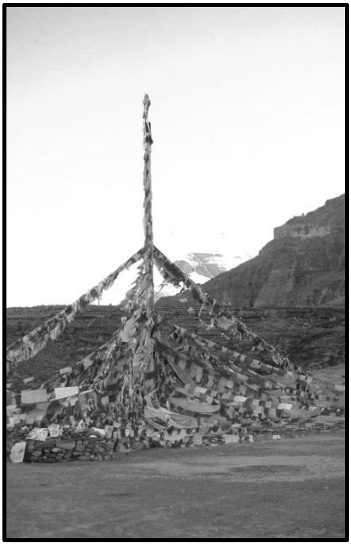
Map of the Kailash Kora


Driraphuk Monastery (4950m)
Jarok Donkhang
# Shiwal Tsal
Drolma La
(5660m)
Gauri Kund Lake
#Axe of Karma
Gesar Ling
Channa Dorje (5750m)
Jampelyang
(5835m)
Chenresig (5675m)
Vijaye (5940m)
Damding
Donkhang
Kangyam Glacier
Shapje Draktok(5250m) #
Gangpo Sanglam La
Mount Kailash
(6714m)
Amitayus (6010m)
Guru Rinpoche Torma
#
Serdung Chortens
3rd Chaktsel Gang
Tara (5940m)
2nd Chaktsel Gang
Nandi
Tso Kapala
Tso Kavala
Lham Chu
Lha Chu
Chuku
Monastery
Topchen
Chu
# Tarboche
# Chorten Kangyi
Serlung Monastery
Zutrulphuk Monastery
(4835m)
Gyangdrak Monastery
1st Chaktsel Gang
Zhong Chu
Trangmar #
Gorge
Darchen (4650m)
4th Chaktsel Gang
Key
# Place of interest
= Pass
▲ Mountain
--- Kora Trek
☼ View point
··· Other trek

Darchen – Driraphuk 8hrs (22km)

From Darchen (4550m), take the obvious trail west along the base of the ridge. The path climbs to the first Chaktsel Gang (prostration place), marked by stones and prayer flaps. The time taken to this point is between **1½–2 hours**. The trail now heads north into the amazing canyon of the Lha Chu River, with the first view of Mount Kailash. The walk into the canyon can be bitterly cold.

Darchen Gompa



Tarboche flagpole

The trail descends to Tarboche, where a flagpole supports hundreds of prayer flags. This pole is replaced each year during the Saga Dawa festival, which occurs on the full moon in May (sometimes June). The raised plateau close by is the burial ground, a place of the dead and the haunt of the eighty-four Mahasiddhas, those tantrics who have reached a higher insight or awareness. Naro Bonchung, the Bon magician, meditated in a cave close by. The Chorten Kangnyi near here marks the beginning of the Kora. It is considered auspicious to pass under this or pass it on the left.

The imposing valley narrows, with the dramatic walls of the canyon towering eerily above. This is the canyon of the western Dhyani Buddha, Amitabha. After passing the almost indistinct remnants of some chortens and mani walls, a solitary stone building is reached. Here is the bridge and path leading up to Chuku Monastery (4800m). This monastery is located below the cliffs of the Nyenri Mountain. It takes about twenty-five minutes to climb up to the monastery, which belongs to the Kagyu-pa sect. A sage called Gotsangpo founded this monastery in the 13th century.

Inside are a marble statue and a conch with a silver lining. Padma Sambhava meditated close by. Sixteen arhats are said to be revealed in the cliff face almost opposite the monastery. Chuku monastery is **3–4 hours** walk from Darchen.

The traditional Kora trail follows the east bank of the Lha Chu to Damding Donkhang (4850m). Darchen to Damding Donkhang is about **6–7 hours**. The impressive buttresses of Kailash are occasionally visible as the trail undulates north. West of the valley are three peaks that represent the Bodhisattvas of longevity; Tara (Drolma), Amitayus (Tsepame), and Vijaye (Namgyelma). Their Tibetan names are given in brackets. A craggy tower to the east is known as the Guru Rinpoche Torma (its Tibetan name is Tyupunjung). Hindus consider this ghostly-shaped pile a vision of Hanuman, the monkey god associated with Rama. A second prostration point or Chaktsel Gang is located near here.

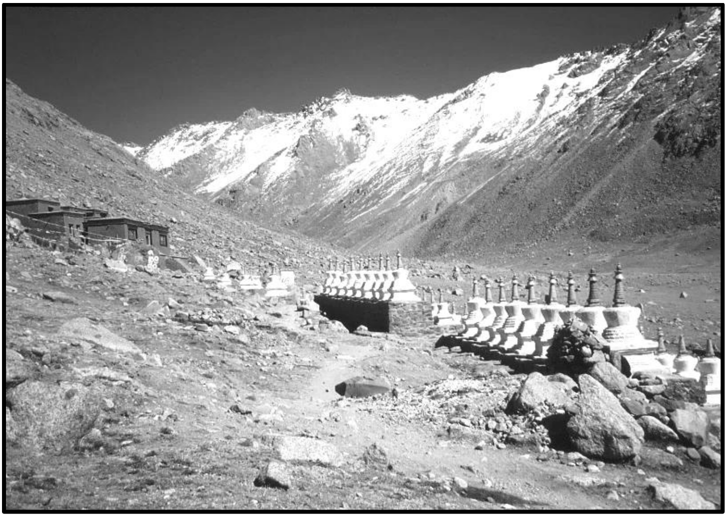
The West Face of Kailash seen from the Kora trail

Continuing up the valley, the walls of the canyon become less hostile, with some grassy spots. Kailash is lost to view as the path, which climbs deceptively, heads towards the monastery of Driraphuk (Diraphuk). To reach the monastery you need to cross the river on a quaint log bridge. The walk from Chuku monastery to Driraphuk monastery along the east track takes about **4 hours**. Pilgrims' rest houses are found on the grassy area across the river.

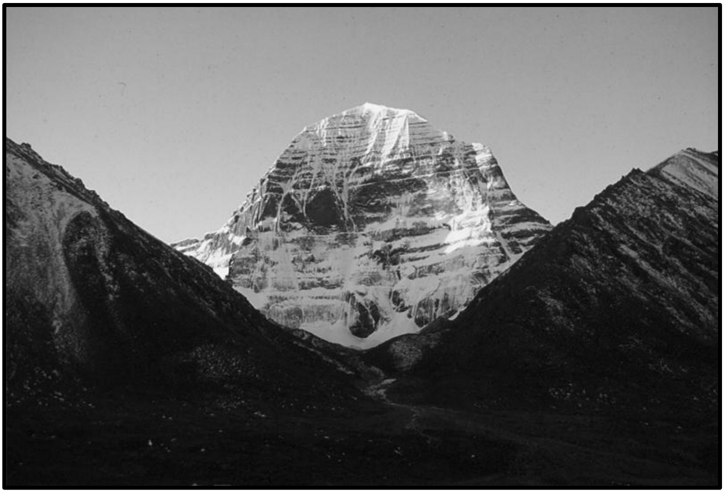
Damding Donkhang camp

On the trail to Driraphuk

> The mountain is so near (to Driraphuk) that it seems to the pilgrim as if he could just walk over and touch it – and at the same time it is intangible in its ethereal beauty, a celestial temple with a dome of crystal or diamond.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**



Driraphuk Monastery



Kailash North Face

The amazing north face of Kailash is stunning from here. On the west is the guardian peak of Channa Dorje (Vajrapani), with Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) on the east. Jampelyang (Manjushri) is northeast of Chenresig. The monastery of Driraphuk (5000m) belongs to the Kagyu-pa order. Driraphuk literally means cave of the female yak horns. Gotsangpo who is widely credited with being the discoverer of the Kailash Kora, meditated here. The monastery has images of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara) with Sakyamuni and Channa Dorje. It is possible to stay here for a day to visit the Kangyam Glacier, but the walk is icy. Normally pilgrims will not do this unless they have completed twelve circuits of the Kora.

> The two hills between which Kailash appears are called the hills of Vajrapani and Manjushri i.e. they are regarded as the seats of the Wielder of the Diamond Sceptre (commonly translated as thunderbolt) who fights against the powers of darkness and decay…and of the Bodhisattva of learning and active wisdom, who with the flaming sword of knowledge cuts through the knots of ignorance and prejudice.
>
> At his side is the hill of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, the Patron of Tibet, while next to the hill of Vajrapani is Dolma (Tara), who is said to have been born out of a tear of Avalokiteshvara when he grieved over the suffering of this world. These hills stand like sentinels (like four pyramids) at both sides of Kailash, seen from this main place of worship.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

Driraphuk – Zutrulphuk 9hrs (23km)

From the monastery, cross the river and head eastwards, quite steeply up. Once the path levels out there is a grassy area known as Jarok Donkhang (approximately 5200m). The glacial Polung valley lies between Mount Chenresig and Mount Jampelyang. To the southeast is the Gangpo Sanglam La pass, which is an alternative, slightly shorter, pass into the eastern Lham Chu valley. The dakini known as Khandroma is said to be a lion-faced deity who guards this inner pass. Only pilgrims who have completed thirteen koras may use it. Trekkers are not advised to use this route, and, in any case, if you invade her territory, the dakini might adopt a wrathful countenance!

With superb views of the north face of Kailash, the trail climbs to the Shiwal Tsal (5330m). This strange place, where worn-out clothes are scattered, is the place of Yama for Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims, a place of death. Pilgrims cut off strips of clothing, or deposit hairs here, or lie down feigning death. These symbolic acts represent the end of one’s life and the beginning of the next on the Drolma La pass. This is about **2 hours** from Driraphuk monastery.

Kailash North Face from near Shiwal Tsal

From here the path climbs for another hour to the foot of the final climb to the Drolma La pass. The last pull to the pass is steep and, due to the altitude, unrelenting. It could well be icy through the boulders. The Drolma (Dolma) La pass is about one hour’s climb from the base of the pass. Prayer flags here festoon the Drolma stone. At a dizzy height of 5640m (18,600ft), the Drolma (Tara) La marks the transition from this life to a new one. All visitors are advised to leave a flag at the pass, for the descent can be icy, with deep snow. The pass is about **4 hours** walk from Driraphuk.

Drolma La pass decked in swathes of prayer flags

Lama Govinda described the top of the Drolma La as a place:

> *…where a blizzard can freeze a man within a few minutes and where every gasp of breath has to be husbanded as if it were the elixir of life.*

Luckily for us, we had a sunny though cold winter's day, with no wind at all and clear blue skies. Below the pass is a view of the lake of compassion, the Tukje (Tukje Chenpo) Tso, or to Hindus, Gauri Kund Lake (5440m/18,400ft). Some Hindus take a ritual bath in the lake if it's not frozen. A legend says that Shiva's consort, Parvati, meditated here to win over Shiva.

Gauri Kund Lake

our past deeds are washed away in the tears of compassion for all suffering beings. Sharing everyone's suffering leaves no room for one's own suffering and finally results in one growing beyond one's own little ego.
***Secrets of Tibet*,**
Giuseppe Tucci and
Dr. Cpt. Ghersi

The path stretches ahead, with distant mountains on the horizon. To the west, look out for an astonishing rock formation on the skyline, known as the Axe of Karma. The Axe of Karma, the emblem of the King of Death, is not so terrible because the power of Tara (Drolma) has rendered it powerless. The way down is long and the last descend to the Lham Chu valley is quite steep. From the pass to here, Shapje Datok (5250m), might take **2 hours**. From Shapje Datok the main path is on the east bank of the river. About half an hour down the valley it is best to cross the river. Further down it is harder to cross. The third Chaktsel Gang prostration point for pilgrims is near the valley which offers a view of the east face of Kailash. The time from Driraphuk to here is around **6 hours**.

The East Face of Kailash

Known as the valley of Milarepa, the eastern valley is relatively easy on the hiker. After about two hours from Shapje Datok, you reach the junction of the Lham Chu and the Topchen Chu. The Lham Chu becomes the Zhong Chu and turns to the southwest. The Zutrulphuk monastery is about one hour further on. The rebuilt monastery of Zutrulphuk is on the site of the miracle cave of Milarepa, whose image is within. The walk between Driraphuk and Zutrulphuk (4690m) monasteries may take about **9 hours**.

Zutrulphuk – Darchen 4hrs (11km)

From the monastery the path heads down mainly gently, with a few unexpected small inclines. The Trangmar Gorge, with its amazing, coloured rocks, is about an hour’s walk. The trail makes one more climb to a rocky knoll before revealing a superb panorama of the Nepal Himalaya and Gurla Mandhata to the south. The last prostration point is soon reached and, after passing some mani walls, Darchen is not far away.

Zutrulphuk Monastery

Trangmar Gorge and our friendly porters

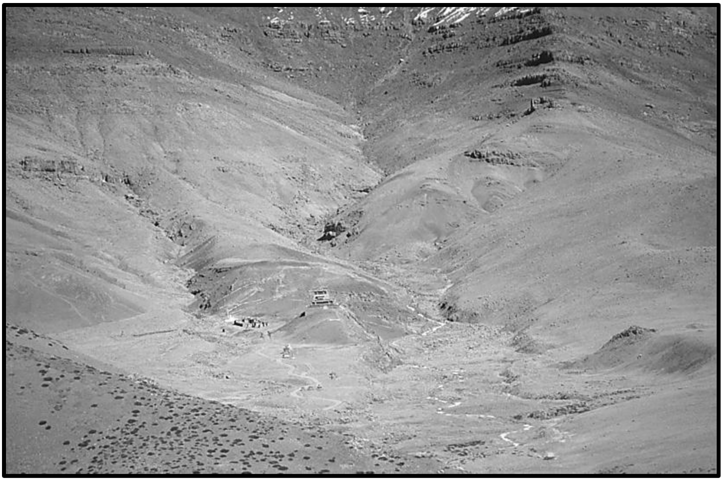
Other walks

Darchen Ridge Walk *7hrs*

The ridge above and to the north of Darchen offers some fabulous views of Kailash and the Inner Kora valleys. Climb steeply up the hill to reach the prayer flags, then walk northwest along the ridge. Take food and plenty of water.

Gyangdrak Monastery *5–6hrs*

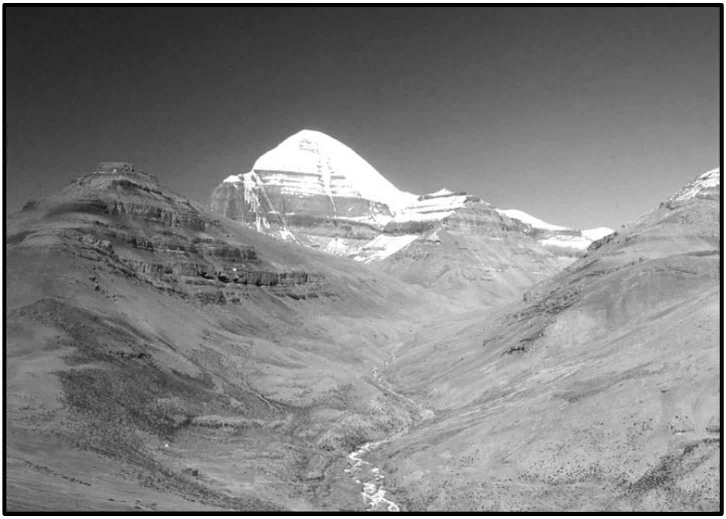
A wide dirt track climbs out of Darchen and heads for Gyangdrak monastery. The rebuilt monastery is a centre for the Drigung Kagyu-pa sect.



Gyangdrak Monastery on a small hill far below Darchen Ridge

Serlung Monastery *4–5hrs*

To walk to Serlung monastery, follow the same wide track from Darchen that goes to Gyangdrak, then turn left and head up the valley westwards.



Serlung Gompa Valley and Nandi peak

Visiting both monasteries might take about 7–8 hours. There is a pass between the two valleys.

The Inner Kora

Called the Nandi Parikrama by Hindus, the inner Kora takes two to three days to complete. The amazing ‘rock chest’ of Nandi is known as Neten Yenlakzung by Tibetans. This is a pilgrimage that should be undertaken only those who have completed thirteen normal koras. The hike involves some dangerously steep sections. We have not done this route.

Great dangers apparently lurk below the great gully – ‘the staircase to heaven’ – where snow, ice and rocks cascade constantly. Right under Kailash are the Serdung Chuksum chortens, which belong to the Drigung Kagyu-pa sect. The Inner Kora then climbs between Nandi and Kailash to over 6150m (20,000ft). There is an equally steep descent to two lakes, the Tso Kapala and the Tso Kavala.

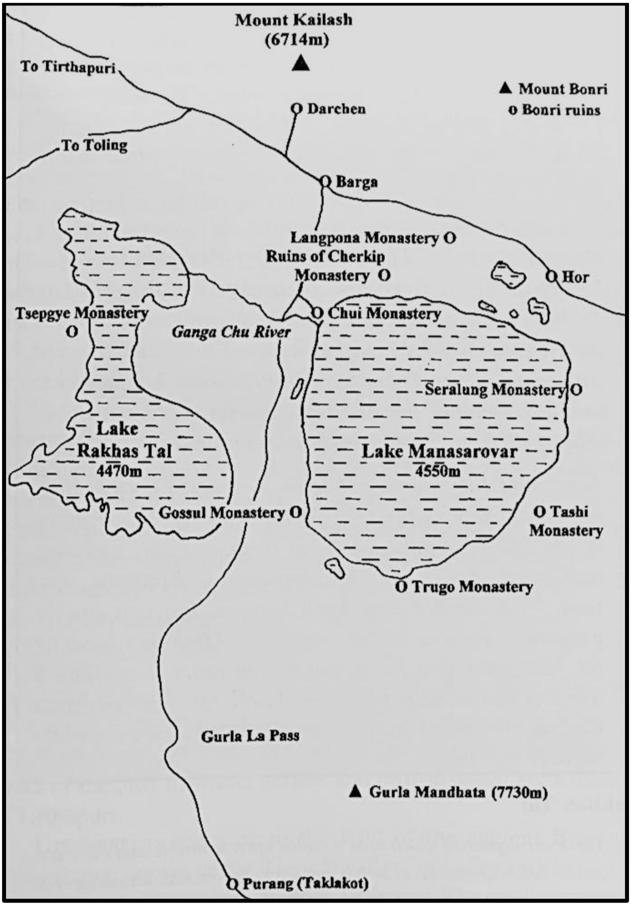
Lake Manasarovar

In Tibetan, Lake Manasarovar is called Mapham Tso. Lake Manasarovar is a lake created from the mind of Brahma. At least five hundred years before Christ, the lake was mentioned in ancient Hindu scriptures. It is also mentioned in the famous epic of India, the Ramayana. Hindus consider Lake Manasarovar to be the home of celestial spirits and the paradise land of Brahma, the creator. The meaning of Manas is light or sun. While Mount Kailash is considered to be the male *lingam*, the lake is regarded as the female *yoni* aspect of the holy region. To cleanse the sins of a hundred lives, a Hindu pilgrim must drink its holy purifying waters. The lake can be fickle, its weather unpredictable; it may be stormy and rough or placid and calm. With infinite variations of light, the lake can be an amazing turquoise colour under clear skies. It can also become dark, brooding and black when raging or provoked by tempests of wind. Buddhists believe that Maya, the mother of the earthly Buddha Siddhartha, washed here prior to the birth of her son. Tibetans consider the origins of the lake to have been instigated by such acts as giving, generosity and enlightenment.

Lake Manasarovar is approximately 90km (55 miles) in circumference. Before the Cultural Revolution there were eight monasteries around the lake. To complete the **Lake Manasarovar ‘Parikrama’**, or walk around the lake, will take from four to five days. Below the small village at Chui Monastery is a primitive building in which the hot springs may offer the opportunity for an attempt at washing. A short walk from Chui village to the prayer flag bedecked ridge to the south will reveal superb panoramic views of Kailash, Gurla Mandhata, the lake and Chui monastery.

Mount Memo Nami, better known as Gurla Mandhata (7800m, 25,350ft), dominates the southern shores of the lake. Other mountains in view on a clear day include Api, Saipal and Nampur, part of the isolated western Nepal Himalaya.

Map of Lake Manasarovar area


Mount Kailash
(6714m)
To Tirthapuri
Mount Bonri
Bonri ruins
Darchen
To Toling
Barga
Langpona Monastery
Ruins of Cherkip
Monastery
Hor
Tsepgye Monastery
Chui Monastery
Ganga Chu River
Seralung Monastery
Lake
Rakhas Tal
4470m
Lake Manasarovar
4550m
Gossul Monastery
Tashi
Monastery
Trugo Monastery
Gurla La Pass
Gurla Mandhata (7730m)
Purang (Taklakot)

Kailash from Chui village **Gurla Mandhata and Manasarovar**

Three legends of Manasarovar

In this legend the sons of Brahma, Marichi and Vaisatha, were giving praise to Kailash. Looking out from the top of Kailash, Shiva and Parvati appeared, but they remained for twelve long years in prayer. It did not rain for aeons of time, so the sons called on Brahma because they could not wash. (Has anything changed since then?!) So that they might cleanse themselves, Brahma created the lake. In thanks they prayed to Mount Kailash, where Shiva sat benignly. Then, lo and behold, a golden lingam appeared before them in the lake.

In another Hindu legend regarding the creation of Lake Manasarovar, Vishnu the God of Preservation was incarnate in his first form or avatar, the fish Matsya. As Matsya he created the four Vedas, the scriptures of the Hindus. When he had completed this task he cried with tears of joy. These tears rolled down his face and, being overcome, the creator Brahma collected these, placed the tears together and so the lake was formed.

According to yet another legend, a certain rich king, Nyngbal, came to the lake. While walking, he observed of life that no one could avoid birth, old age, suffering and death. Soon after he consulted a Brahmin, who said, “you cannot stop such actions, but you can be generous, so give to the poorest.” After this meeting the king gave rice freely for twelve years. Each day it was cooked to help the poor. Every time the rice was cooked the excess water was discarded and eventually became the lake.

Rakhas Tal

> There are mysteries which man is called upon to unveil, and there are others which are meant to be felt, but not to be touched, whose secrecy must be respected. Rakastal is one of these.
> ***The Way of the White Clouds*, Lama Anagarika Govinda**

The Rakhas Tal lake is to the west of Manasarovar, separated by a low grassy ridge but linked to it by a small river. The Ganga Chu is the river or channel that runs between the two lakes. For about thirty years it remained dry, a period that coincided with the ‘dark ages’ of Tibet’s occupation. Water runs here once again and Tibetans take this sign as a good omen for the future.

The Rakhas Tal lake is smaller than its dominant neighbour and is called Langak Tso by Tibetans. Rakhas means the dark moon. There are two islands of note, called Lachato and Topserma. One of the sources of the River Sutlej exits from the northwest side of the lake.

A number of other significant rivers flow from the northern slopes of the Indian Himalaya, all draining into the infant river Sutlej as it begins its tempestuous journey through the mountains. Just one monastery is to be found on the shores of Rakhas Tal, that of Tsepgye (Chepgey) Gompa. Flocks of Brahminy ducks can often be seen here.

Rakhas Tal looking west

The demons of Hindu mythology reside here in this habitat of evil creatures. Rakhas Tal is considered to be the Demon Lake and as such is given the name Ravena Soravar. The Rakshas are the demons. According to the great Indian epic, the Ramayana, the demon Ravena is the one who abducted Sita. Ravena is later said to have given devotion to Lord Shiva to be cleansed of his sin. Pilgrim visitors view Rakhas Tal very negatively, for its waters do not offer any therapeutic aid.

Tirthapuri

Tirthapuri is the third holy pilgrimage site within the Kailash region, close to the River Sutlej. It hosts hot medicinal springs in which pilgrims can wash and bathe. The famous multicoloured strata of the cliff in white, yellow and brownish-red are a feature of Tirthapuri.

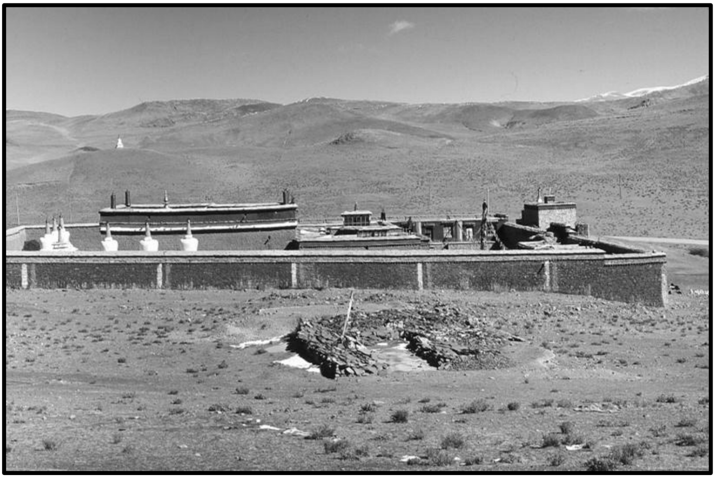
Tirthapuri is the gate to the land of the ancient Bon and Shangshung, known as the ‘Garuda valley’ or valley of Khyung. It is possible to follow a ‘kora’ route at Tirthapuri. The small monastery devoted to Guru Rinpoche has considerable significance, for it is here that with one of his consorts, Yeshe Tsogyal, he spent time in meditation. The teachings of Guru Rinpoche were recorded by Yeshe Tsogyal and were later buried as *tertons*, texts to be revealed at a much later time when the need arises. There is a footprint of Guru Rinpoche in the monastery.

Other sights include piles of yak horns, cremation grounds, mani walls, and a small hill pass, in addition to the monastery and hot springs.

Tirthapuri is about 10km south of Moincer (Mensi), which lies some 65km to 70km southwest of Darchen.

Drongba Monastery

On the road between Kathmandu and Kailash is the fascinating monastery at Drongba, which marks the eastern limit of the Kailash region. The so-named ‘monastery of the seven hairs’ belongs to the Sakya-pa, with its grey walls, and has very impressive figures inside. The main sanctum has a colossal statue of Guru Rinpoche, indicating the presence of the Nyingma-pa here in earlier times. The guarding deities of the chapel are four equally impressive figures. These include the guardians Tamdrin and Channa Dorje. A close inspection near the doors will reveal a picture of the two-headed bird on a mural. It can be viewed in two different ways.

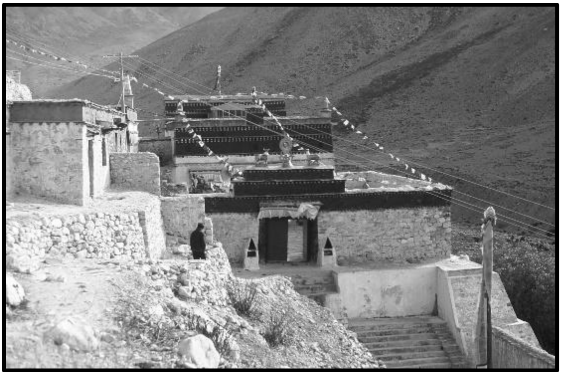


Drongba Monastery

The route back to Kathmandu passes through Paryang, Drongba and Saga, where the new route heads south, with views of the Ganesh Himal range, to Kyirong and the Rasuwa/Trisuli border for Kathmandu. A link road goes east from Saga to Lhatse. Another road close to Xixapangma heads east to Tingri via Lake Pekhu Tso.

The old route crosses the Lalung La pass to Nyalam, where a cave used by Milarepa nearby is a sight before the border at the Friendship Bridge at Zhangmu/Kodari, also leading to Kathmandu.

Ganesh Himal is well out of reach after heavy snow!



Milarepa's Cave near Nyalam

CHAPTER EIGHT

Guge and Ancient Shangshung

Little remains of Shangshung, a land lost in history some 1,500 years ago. Faint images and crumbling ruins dot the landscape of Guge, but hard evidence has long dispersed under the winds and elements of nature.

What is known is that Guge extended far into India in the west. Its western boundaries reached well down the Sutlej River into Kinnaur, as far as Kanam, Poo and Morang close to modern-day Rekong Peo, under the shadow of the Kinnaur Kailash mountain. In fact this mountain is famed together with Kalpa village above Rekong Peo as the winter home of Shiva, who took refuge here from the harsher climes on Kailash itself. The whole of the Spiti river region and, further north, the Zanskar valleys were also under the tutelage of the Guge kings for much of the time. Ladakh, always more independent and well to the north, remained culturally linked to Guge, at times firmly controlling it and much of the region of western Tibet.

The Guge kingdom in history

The history of the Guge kingdom is really the history of the revival of Buddhism in western Tibet and indeed of Tibet as a whole. Professor Tucci has suggested that the Mallas from north-western Nepal might have introduced some of these reviving Buddhist influences into Guge. This theory has so far been little investigated.

After the assassination of the pro-Bon King Langdarma in 842AD, years of misrule, anarchy and lawlessness followed. Both Ladakh and Spiti reverted to independent fiefdoms under a local Gyelpo. After the assassination there is confusion about the events that followed. In central Tibet a nephew of Langdarma contested the throne. Yumtsen assumed the post of regent, encouraged by Buddhist monks. Then a son of Langdarma, O Sung (Namde Wosung), came to Guge. Centred on Toling, he began a brief revival of Buddhism. He ruled until about 870AD and presided over a calmer period. His son was Depel Khortsen, who reigned until about 900AD. He is thought to have built up to eight monasteries and presided over the translation of the Sanskrit Prajnaparamita texts. He was killed by Bon anti-Buddhist elements.

In 920AD two of Langdarma’s grandsons came to the Shangshung region. These sons of Depel Khortsen were Tashi Segspel, who later remained in the east surrounded by the turmoil around Lhasa, and

Nyima Gon. Nyima Gon, the older one, came to Purang. He ousted the local Gyelpo, Geshe Tashisen, and married his daughter. Nyima Gon then set forth to expand the Guge kingdom, annexing all of Zanskar, Spiti, Lahaul and much of Kinnaur. Ladakh as far west as Lamayuru also came under his control when the Gyelpo of Shyok, north of Leh in the Nubra valley, requested his help to repulse tribal invaders from Khotan. Nyima Gon established his headquarters at Shey, building the citadel that partially remains today. Thus Ladakh became firmly linked to Guge and Tibet.

When he died around 930AD, his three sons inherited the three regions known as Maryul (Ladakh), Guge and Purang. The eldest son, Lhachen Palgyi Gon, ruled Ladakh and established the Lhachen dynasty. His rite extended from Rutok as far west as the Zoji La pass close to Srinagar. He ruled from around 930–960AD.

The younger sons ruled the regions of western Guge–Lahaul–Spiti, and Purang–eastern Guge. It is not known for certain if these three sons adhered to the Bon or the Buddhist philosophies. The grandson of Nyima Gon, who resided at Guge, was a Buddhist, and under him the religious awakening really became established. His name was King Kor De, more famously known as Lama Lachen Yeshe O. He is thought to have lived between 967–1040AD.

Yeshe O and his nephew Changchup O were the most pious of Guge kings. Another nephew, Sron-ne was apparently left in charge of the day-to-day administration of Guge, allowing Yeshe O to devote his energies to the Buddhist revival. Sron-ne controlled greater Guge, with vast swathes of Zanskar, Lahaul, Kinnaur and Spiti under his domain. An inscription at Tabo leads credence to this.

Yeshe O was instrumental in developing Toling and its monastic centre. The fort and monastery of Tsaparang became the capital of the Guge region. But at this time the region was virtually surrounded by powerful Muslim sultans. The Muslim threats came from the north and west, from Kashgar and Kashmir. This Muslim threat, while not a direct threat, still hampered trade with Guge. There were also still some residual threats from Bon in the east.

Around 973, Yeshe O decided to send twenty-one students from Toling to Vikramashila in India to study Buddhism. Only two, Lekpai Sherap and Rinchen Zangpo, survived the unhealthy Indian climate. Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) became famous as the great *Lotsawa*. See box in Chapter 2, page 50, for more details.

Rinchen Zangpo gained fame for his work in Toling and in greater Guge, but he also took an interest in the Bon and, in particular, the ancient language of Shangshung. In 1026 the Kalachakra teachings were introduced from India. At the time of Rinchen Zangpo, the influence of the Guge kingdom extended across the Himalaya to the region of Kinnaur, Spiti, Zanskar and parts of Ladakh in India.

Rinchen Zangpo is credited with establishing a hundred and eight monasteries, many being across the border in India. Toling, Tsaparang, Tabo, Nako, Lha Lung and Alchi are the more well-known sites that survive today, with their fabulous Kashmiri/Nepali inspired paintings. Most of the monasteries developed at this time belong to the new Kadam-pa sect, the forerunner of the Gelug-pa. These monasteries, unlike their counterparts in other parts of Tibet, strongly followed what became almost a cult, the central deity of Vairocana. He is the unseen Buddha linked to the four directional Dhyani Buddhas.

Yeshe O later instructed his followers to arrange for the great Indian master Atisha to be brought to Toling. According to some texts, Yeshe O was captured by raiders and, when his nephew Changchub O raised the ransom money, he told him to use it instead to invite Atisha to Toling. Other stories suggest that, having exhausted his personal treasury in Guge, he found a gold mine in Garhwal, but the local ruler, a Nepali king, imprisoned him until his death around 1040.

Throughout his life Yeshe O remained the nominal ruler, but governance was in the hands of Sron-ne. In 985 his son Changchub O was given power, but he, like Yeshe O, preferred to put his energy into the ongoing Buddhist revival. Changchub O finally persuaded Atisha to come to Toling in about 1040, thus completing the wishes of Yeshe O.

Atisha is known as Jowo Je in Tibet and he remained three years in Toling Monastery. Atisha is credited with separating his teachings from the older Tantric school of the Nyingma-pa and the Bon, which was not so dissimilar in outlook. Atisha founded the Kadam-pa sect, which looked away from more liberal Tantric ideas to ones encompassing more tolerance and compassion.

Following after Yeshe O, Sron-ne and Changchub O, who all shared power, was King O Ide (also known as Lhade Od). King O Ide was the elder brother of Changchub O and his period in power is confused. It might have been as early as 990 or perhaps later from around 1000–1030. Siba O, another brother, also decided to devote his time to religious study. O Ide died at about the time of Atisha’s arrival in Toling, but Changchub O appears to have been alive at the time, having renovated some of the shrines there. An inscription at Tabo in Spiti attests to this fact. Changchub O might have taken power again until his death around 1050AD.

The son of O Ide, King Tse De came to power after Changchub O. Further translations took place under Tse De, including some by the Zanskar translator, Phagspa Sherab, and the Nepalese scholar Shantibhadra. A great Buddhist convention was held in 1076 under Tse De at Tabo in Spiti, with emissaries from central and eastern Tibet invited.

The Kingdom of Guge prospered until around 1100 but continued to be hampered in its trade by still strong Muslim regions. After the death of the strong King Tse De, Guge fell into decline as the powerful Lachen kings of Ladakh aquired more power. Of the three sons of Tse De, two became monks and the other Bar De became king. During his tenure, Lachen Utpala, the king of Ladakh, effectively subjugated Guge. The following kings, Tashi De, Bha De, Namgyel De and Sanphug De remained as nominal heads, but real power resided with the Ladakhi rulers.

Guge also managed to avoid any serious threats from the Mongolian hordes, who had taken Tibetan Buddhism as their national religion some time earlier. Tibet as a whole did not suffer unduly under the Mongols, but the introduction of the Sakya-pa sect undermined the earlier sects in much of the country, though not in Guge. By 1300 the cultural ties between Guge and India waned, as Kashmiri influences grew in the west. Overall, the Guge kingdom remained a cohesive and relatively intact region for around seven centuries.

Under Tashi De, Guge attempted to fight the Ladakhi King Blogros Chogdan in the mid-15th century, but to no avail. However, despite his power, Blogros lost power to Lachen Bhagan, who began the dynasty of the Namgyal Kings in Ladakh. This point marked the split between Ladakh and Tibet, which included Guge.

Little is known about the Guge kings after this. However, one king, Trakten De, had a brief period free of the Ladakhi tribute. This was during a war in the northern region between Ladakh and Kashgar, but he held little real power. Sengge Namgyal, the most famous Ladakhi king, continued to exert influence over Guge in the early 17th century. At this time the Gelug-pa also became the dominant religious sect in Guge, as it was over all of Tibet, including the far western regions bordering India. Trakpa De came to power around 1620. It was under this benevolent king that a totally alien influence arrived.

In the often-contorted history of Guge, the next major event was the appearance of western visitors in the form of Jesuit missionaries from Goa and Portugal. The first serious Jesuit visitor was Antonio de Andrade, who was born in Oleiros in Portugal in 1580. He was sent to Goa as a child and became attached to the mission schools. Besotted with missionary fervour in 1624, he and Manuel Marques joined Hindu pilgrims heading for a sacred mountain in Tibet. They travelled via Hardwar in Kumaon and remained in disguise at first. On being discovered as foreigners, they were initially accused of being spies but continued anyway. Having been accepted as explorers, they travelled on via the holy Hindu valley of Badrinath.

In August 1624, they crossed into Tibet over the Manas Pass north of the Garhwal peaks of India, At the time many pilgrims were dying on these high passes, and for many years it was assumed that they were killed by the ‘noxious vapours’ that were found at these altitudes. Hundreds of years later, we now know that this was due to altitude sickness. They arrived at Tsaparang, where King Trakpa De received them with open arms.

In Tsaparang, surprisingly perhaps, a strong bond was established between the missionaries and the Royal Family. Andrade soon returned to Agra in India, arriving back in November 1624. With knowledge of conditions in Guge it was decided to return to see if there was any possibility of establishing a church mission in Tsaparang. On 12 April during Easter 1626, the first ever church foundations were consecrated in Tibet at Tsaparang. The church was completed in August and soon afterwards other missionaries arrived. Andrade apparently made one visit to Toling and subsequently his presence in Guge became widely known. He is said to have communicated with King Sengge Namgyal of Ladakh in 1627. He left Tsaparang sometime just before 1630 and died in 1634. Manuel Marques, who remained behind, disappeared in the mêlée that followed the ruckus with Ladakh and was not heard of after 1641.

The consequences of Andrade’s church mission in Tsaparang were not immediately apparent. Although historically the presence of the mission was blamed for the downfall of Guge, this may not be the end of the story. One theory is that, fearing pollution from the new religion, the lamas connived with the neighbouring Ladakhis to overthrow the Guge monarch.

The kingdom never recovered from this and went into decline.

It has been suggested by the noted Tibetan historian, Gyurme Dorje, that a quarrel between Ladakh and Guge over the king’s bride might have cemented the difficulties. It is believed that one of the kings of Guge had disowned his mentally sick wife and sought another younger bride from Ladakh. This new bride, however, was refused entry to Guge by the lamas, and it was this that enraged the King of Ladakh. The skirmishes and invasion that followed contributed to the catastrophic downfall of Guge.

In 1631 the Jesuit Francisco de Azevedo left for the kingdom of Guge. It is possible that his departure to Tibet heralded a return to reopen the mission. However, this did not happen, and one of his comments might have reflected the difficulties. He says of Tsaparang, “*the castle in which the king resides lies on top of the mountain and, on account of its situation and defences, is impregnable*.” He left apparently in despair of further promoting Christianity and departed to Leh.

Ashok De succeeded Trakpa De, but all real power over Guge was in the hands of King Delek Namgyal, the Ladakhi ruler. The major conflict between Ladakh and Tibet in the mid 17th century drew outside powers briefly into the region, in the form of the Mughals. The Maharaja of Bushahr, Kehari Singh, in Kinnaur joined in on the Tibetan side. Kehari Singh later married a princess from Guge and upper Kinnaur was given back as a dowry. A treaty between Tibet and Ladakh was concluded after intervention by the powerful fifth Dalai Lama to dispel Mughal intensions in 1665.

From this time on Guge was split up; the eastern region was given to Tibet and the western zones, upper Kinnaur and Spiti, went to Ladakh. The actual time of the downfall of Guge is not actually recorded, but it might have been after 1680. The interaction between Ladakh and Guge is discussed later under History of Ladakh and Spiti. After the first skirmishes, the Buddhist rulers in Leh are said to have engaged Muslim mercenaries from Kashmir in 1685 to drive out the king. All the people and dignitaries in Tsaparang surrendered in exchange for safe passage but having done so were brutally murdered.

A number of rulers from the Mal dynasty nominally controlled small parts of Guge. The Mal rulers may have been linked to the Mallas of Kathmandu, Nepal. With the demise of Pratap Mal, no further power resided in Tsaparang and Guge. From that time on, the glories of Tsaparang, and with it the Guge kingdom, slowly melted back into oblivion, as erosion and decay through nature reduced many of the edifices.

The Cultural Revolution caused further destruction of a large number of artworks that had survived seven hundred years of nature’s power, but fortunately today we can still marvel at many of these historic and eerie remains.

Exploring Guge

Gurugyam Monastery

The 11th century remains of Gurugyam (Guru Gem, *gyam* means cliff) cliff monastery lie about 9km southwest of Tirthapuri, downstream.

The village here is called Pelkye. The original village was destroyed in 1841 by the Dogra general Zorawar Singh, from Jammu, India, before he was killed near Purang. The monastery was rebuilt in 1935 by Khyuntrul Rinpoche and the actual building is called Dongathagyaling. This is a major site for the Bonpo, and the Bon ideas were originally revived here. The monastery at the foot of the cliff has once again been rebuilt since the Cultural Revolution.

The Cave Monastery above is said to be connected with Gyerpung Drenpa Namkha, the 8th century Bon master. Gyerpung Drenpa Namkha was a master of Shangshung. He became enlightened after a learned Bon sage taught him the message of the four ways. He wrote down the oral teachings of a text known as the ‘Zhang Zhuug Snaan Rgyud,’ in the late 8th century. This scripture also included what became known as the way of Dzogchen, the basis of both Bon and Buddhist Nyingma-pa texts, called the ‘Great Perfection.’ His son, Tsewang Rigzin, is a deity who holds a swastika in his left hand.

In ‘The Treasury of Good Sayings’ by Samten Karmay, the author suggests that central Shangshung was administered by eight kings. They ruled the areas known as Purang, Kailash and Khyunglung valley.

Khyunglung

A further 16km to the south of Gurugyam is Khyunglung, at about 4,250m. This involves a two-day trek over a small pass, which we have not experienced. It is possible that access may soon be possible from the south, off the route we took a few kilometres to the south. The village and ruins are some distance apart. There is a thermal spring nearby and much of the area is volcanic, with some lava columns. The monastery and fort above are part of Khyunglung Ngulkar, meaning the Silver Palace of the Khyung Bird (Garuda) valley.

Throughout ancient history as far back as Mesopotamia the man-bird figure has appeared in different cultures. In Hindu mythology the Garuda is the vehicle of Vishnu, god of preservation. In a fight with Indra, the god of thunder and rain, he breaks the thunderbolt of Indra. The thunderbolt is the vajra or dorje that has been so keenly adopted by Vajrayana Buddhism.

The rugged cliffs that hide Khyunglung

The Garuda becomes the Khyung bird of the Bon and Shangshung, born from the gods of fire, a sort of (Hindu) Agni figure. The bird can vanquish all the demons and serpents that torment the soul. Generally the Khyung bird has the head of an eagle with horns, and the body of a man. It has red wings. According to scholars, the word in the old language of western Tibet, Shang, means the Garuda or Khyung bird. From this Shang-shung becomes the Khyung-gateway.

The ruins here might once have included the palace of King Ligmigya, the last ruler of Shangshung. The scenery is particularly strange here, for the soils and rocks are the colours of silver, red, orange and yellow. The area is riddled with caves and there are labyrinthine tunnels and natural burrows. Examples of this magnificent variety in the landscape can be seen on the new road that passes close by to the south, where deep valleys have been cut by seasonal flows of water and flash floods.

When William Moorcroft became the first western visitor to the area in 1812, he described the scenes in his journal. Later Sven Hedin managed to get to Khyunglung and recounted that only eight monks were in residence. Tucci also came by and discovered a statue which made him conclude that Khyunglung probably became a Buddhist centre in the 15th century, thus consigning its Bon roots to history.

Dongpo Monastery

Dongpo Gompa may have been founded under Khewang Jamyang Shinti. This quite large monastery sits on a flattish hilltop with a ruined fortress high above. It lies some 25km west of Khyunglung on the southern route from Darchen to Toling. It is painted like a monastery of the Sakya-pa but apparently belongs now to the Gelug-pa sect. It might once also have had early Guge murals from the time of Rinchen Zangpo.

Dongpo Monastery

Dawa Monastery

The Dawa village and monastery ruins are located on the new route that links Darchen and Toling via the southern road south of the River Sutlej. The village is approached from the east, with incredible eroded cliffs on the west side of this canyon. There is a military check-post just east of the village, and an ugly Chinese compound. This valley is called the valley of the Moon Castle. Khewang Jamyang Shinti was probably the founder of Dawa Monastery.

Lama Govinda visited **Dawa** and described it in 1948. At that time one chapel had a golden roof with wall paintings inside. We were unable to visit the ruins, which are quite hard to make out from the surrounding towers and caves.

There are reported to be three main Lhakhangs (chapels) here; the main assembly hall the Dukhang, a Chamba Lhakhang devoted to Maitreya, and the Lama Lhakhang, probably devoted to the head lama of the monastery. A number of chortens remain like ghostly reminders of its once-powerful overlords.

Mangang Monastery

This isolated monastery and village are east of Toling, hidden in one of the many strangely eroded valleys of the Sutlej. According to Tibetan scholar Gyumre Dorje, the Mangang (also Mangnang) ruins date back to King Chang Chub O (984–1078). The Indian master Atisha, who stayed at Toling, also came here to consecrate two chapels; these were the Lhakhang of Changchub and the Lhakhang of Jampa(pel), a Maitreya chapel devoted to the future Buddha. In the 13th century four other chapels were apparently added under King Laga.

This monastery was (unusually for Guge) constructed on low ground, suggesting that its devotees had little to fear from outside challenges. Buddhism after the 11th century was firmly entrenched into the culture. Other examples of this style are at Alchi in Ladakh and Tabo in Spiti; similar structures protected only by high walls.

According to Professor Tucci, the complex once comprised of two sections – the upper area known as the Khardsong, and a lower zone, the Ussukhar. He found a number of Kashmiri-style murals in existence at Mangang when he visited. These are recorded in photographs; the main images were Akshobhya, Vajradharma, a dancing Apsara, Vajrapani and Hayagriva. All appeared to relate to Rinchen Zangpo and his band of Indian artists in the 11th century.

The Mangang Valley is spectacular

Toling

Toling, now also known as Zanda, was the largest and most active monastery in western Tibet and the Guge Kingdom. A few poplar trees shade part of the newer area of the modern town of Zanda. The town comprises the monastery, a Tibetan village and a new glossy main street lined with Chinese shops, cafés and hotels, as well as a post office and telecommunications centre.

Toling Monastery

The Toling monastic complex is enclosed in a walled compound that lies west of the main settlement. There are two gates on the east and north sides of the compound. Until the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, the monastery remained active. At that time there were at least six main chapels. Today the monastic area contains two substantially intact buildings. A third, the Yeshe O temple, is at the heart of the complex and is known as the golden house. Sadly the remains have been little restored yet, and some of the artwork inside has been severely damaged. The shrine does however retain its distinctive mandala shape.

Two others, the Neten Lhakhang or Golden Temple, and the Tongyu chapel, have been completely destroyed. Both were once reputedly magnificent chapels. The Neten once hosted murals depicting the Sixteen Arhats. Also gone is the Serkhang building once found in the northwest corner. When Tucci visited he was able to take photographs of this three-storey, square temple surrounded or perhaps supported by wooden beams.

A spectacular drive to Toling

Although a very long day, if your driver is willing, the southern route's proximity to the Indian Himalaya offers unrivalled views. The scenery along this route is out of this world. This route leaves the main Darchen–Rutok road at about Km1325.

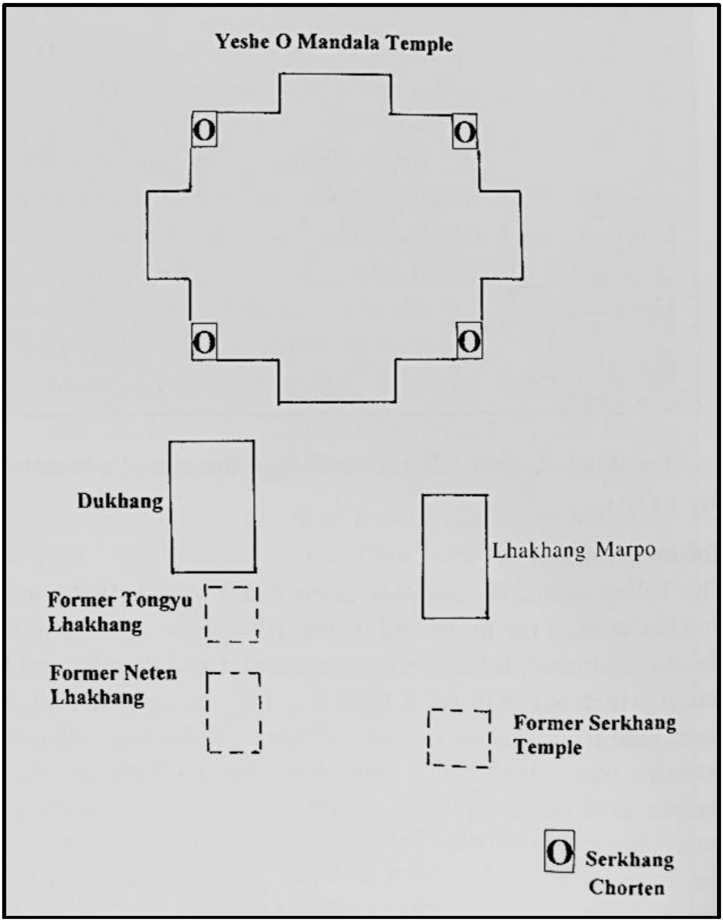
After some low hills, the road climbs higher and higher; the white dome of Kailash is stunning, standing alone in the distance. Suddenly the road crests a ridge and all the majesty of the Indian Himalaya is before your eyes! Nanda Kot, the Nanda Devi peaks, Panch Chuli, Kamet and the peaks of Ladakh. Heading downwards, the road snakes into a small canyon and to a large river at about 40km from the turnoff. This river, although not considered as such, might well be the true source of the River Sutlej. The recognised source is close to Rakhas Tal. There are some very dramatic fluted mud features to the south. This large river is bridged just before a hidden gorge where the river plunges into oblivion and joins the Sutlej.

The route is interrupted by innumerable deep gorges, slashed through the earth. Within these gorges are rock formations of indescribable beauty with shapes and colours that defy the imagination. At some point the road is just to the south of the Khyunglung Ngulkar castle, but it remains elusive to the eye. Apart from the fantastic canyons, the Dongpo Gompa is the next feature, with the main monastery near the road and a ruined fort above.

The route continues to dive in and out of the contorted erosion features, sandstone spires, cathedral-like lines of pinnacles and a general disorder of ghostly turrets. The monastery of the 'Castle Moon valley' at Dawa (Km220) is perched high on the rocks above the village. Hermit caves and other ruins are almost impossible to pick out among the cliffs of mudstones. There is also a checkpost here, so ask before taking any photos. From Dawa a rough track climbs back to the plains before once more dropping into a larger valley. This is the Mangang valley. It hides the remains of the Mangang Gompa.

After thousands more mud stalactite-like features, the road finally joins the Sutlej Canyon. It is about another 12km into Toling; the end of a breath-taking day's drive.

Plan of Toling Monastery

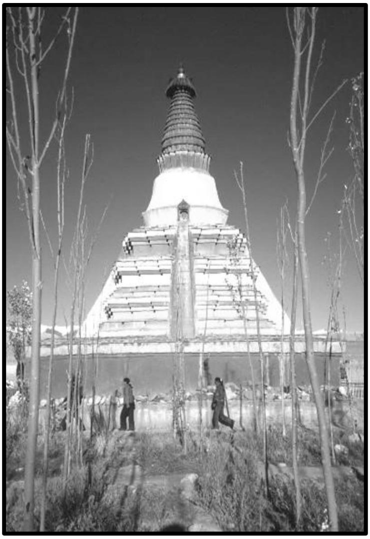

Yeshe O Mandala Temple
Dukhang
Lhakhang Marpo
Former Tongyu Lhakhang
Former Neten Lhakhang
Former Serkhang Temple
Serkhang Chorten

The Gelug-pa influence reached Toling in the 15th century. Other emissaries of Tsong Khapa also proceeded to Ladakh and began monastic building programs. (Spituk and Thikse).

What remains of Toling should not be missed; there are some amazing sights:

Serkhang Chorten

To the north of the main monastery compound, close to the new gardens, this is an impressive chorten (below) that has recently been rebuilt. less restored chorten is located beyond the Tibetan village to the southwest of the main complex; this may have been consecrated by Yeshe O.



Lhakhang Karpo

The Lhakhang Karpo, part of a cluster of buildings, is the red temple of Toling Monastery. Rinchen Zangpo probably lived here. The Buddhas of the past (Dipankar), present (Sakyamuni) and future (Maitreya) have been rebuilt and can be viewed in the darkened rear chamber. The paintings in this dark chapel are hard to see and a torch is needed to reveal more of this eerie temple. A few isolated examples of the Kashmiri art for which Guge is famous can just be discerned in the gloom.

Lhakhang Marpo

The Lhakhang Marpo houses some amazing artwork and is the white temple across the open area to the west. The chapel’s large deodar wooden doors are very impressive. Unfortunately all the statues inside have been severely damaged, if not obliterated. The left walls have suffered the most damage, but nonetheless remain an impressive vision. Most of the Tibetan deities and icons, from the Kagyu-pa to the Gelug-pa, can be viewed on the right walls, which are much better preserved. Avalokiteshvara, Vajrasattva, Padmapani, Amitabha, translator Lekpai Sherab who accompanied Rinchen Zangpo, Tsong Khapa, Vijaye, Drolma, Prajnaparamita and some Drigung - Kagyu-pa deities are displayed, as well as some meditation deities in all modes.

Yeshe O Mandala Temple

The Yeshe O shrine was once one of the most impressive sights in Toling. The outside walls of this temple have been repainted red, and at each corner there are four magnificent colourful chortens set high on top of the walls. Unfortunately much of the interior is bleak and bare. The central deity in the main chapel inside was believed to be the fifth Dhyani Buddha, Vairocana. His image is quite common in western Tibet and in Ladakh. He is presented in a wrathful pose, which is not unusual.

Gyatso Lhakhang

In the Gyatso Lhakhang there is a small museum area before the entrance to the main chapel. You can walk around the outside of the main chapel, where a number of doors disclose further small rooms. Virtually all the shrines within these rooms have also been obliterated, though some renovation is now beginning.

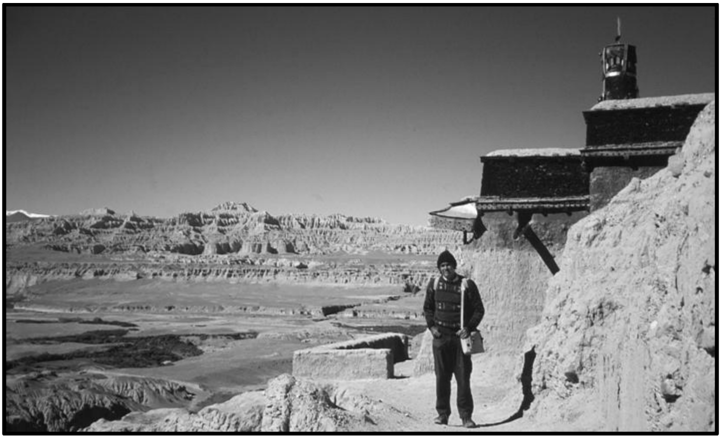
Serkhang Temple

The now completely ruined Serkhang structure was formerly the most revered temple in Toling. The three storeys of the building, decreasing in size going upwards, represented the mandala in three dimensions. This also indicated the three levels through which the Buddha passed on his way to enlightenment.

On the amazing sandstone pinnacles and craggy features to the south, high above Toling, are the remains of two cliff-top structures and meditation caves. To reach these places requires great effort and, due to the crumbling nature of the terrain, the route remains rather precarious. Few substantial ruins remain now.

Dorje Jigme Lhakhang

It was somewhere now lost to time that Lama Govinda located a chapel containing a ferocious image of the buffalo-headed demon, Dorje Jigje or Yamantaka. Dorje Jigje, who is the slayer of death, is the wrathful emanation of Manjushri. This bull-headed deity is a link between all mortal living things, animals and humans. But these mortal spirits can never die and thus remain immortal.



Demchok Lhakhang, Tsaparang

Tsaparang

> In front of us the whole hillside is covered with tremendous ruins; a dead city which seems to be keeping vigil over the desolate abandonment of the yellow, tormented waste of stones, with the empty eye-sockets of its ruined castle and of its ruinous troglodytic dwellings… frescoes desecrated and desolated, many are beginning to perish…
> …Today it looks as if the stony wilderness were climbing upwards from the valley with a slow but inexorable advance and that it is engulfing in its naked yellow throat the last vestiges of a great past.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Tsaparang is less than 1 hour's drive from Toling (about 25km south), and is the home of the ancient Guge kingdom The sometimes frighteningly narrow road from Toling clings initially to the soft eroded crumbling hillsides above the Sutlej. It climbs at one point into a ghostly side canyon before doubling back high above the dry riverbed. Closer to Tsaparang is a wider plain separating it from the river. A track leads from the village further on and up to the base of the ruins.

The castle fortress monastic complex of Tsaparang is a tremendous sight, set within cliffs of fantastic fairytale, sandstone organ pipes and spires. Within its hilltop fortress are some of the most exquisite murals and paintings found in Tibet. Many of the statues were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, but with a bit of imagination you can be carried away into a land of dreams. Dismembered limbs and heads remain to remind us of the beauty and craftsmanship that was created so carefully by man seven hundred years ago, and destroyed so carelessly by man just forty or so years ago. No photos are allowed inside the monasteries, but the visual images will live on forever in one's memory. It is not only man's artwork that is so stunning at Tsaparang. Its geographical location, perched dramatically on a steep-sided hilltop, with eroded pillars and tunnels, is a supreme example of the power of nature.

Tsaparang is built around and up the side of a dramatic hill some 150m to 200m high. The main chapels containing the famous paintings are found rising from the lowest part of the hill. Above these a good stairway and path climbs up through ruins, exciting tunnels and caves that were the monks' quarters. Almost hidden and on the summit are the summer and winter palaces, the Demchok Lhakhang chapel and various now ill-defined structures.

From its beginnings in the late 10th century, the development of Guge centred on Toling. However, when Tibet fell under the dominance of the Mongolians and the Sakya-pa sect was established, its fortune waned. Sometime between the late 14th century and the early 15th century, the Guge kingdom's fortunes were revived by King Namgyel-De in Tsaparang.

His son Puntsok-de (some refer to him as Sanphug De) established Tsaparang as the capital of the Guge kingdom. One of the early structures he built was the Lotsang Lhakhang, below the main hill of Tsaparang, and an upper monastery known as Driteng. Under first Lobsang Rabten, and later in the 16th century, Jigme Wangchuk, expansion continued. Tsaparang would later host a few thousand people, many engaged in trade between India, Tibet and Ladakh.

Of his visit to Tsaparang in 1912, Captain G. M. Young states:

> The ruins of the city are extensive and guarded on one side by a chain of small round mud forts. Terraced fields, no longer cultivated, lie around the dzongpen's (local governor's) house, a temple with a single lama in charge, and the dwellings of four other families which constitutes the population of Tsaparang.

Drolma Lhakhang

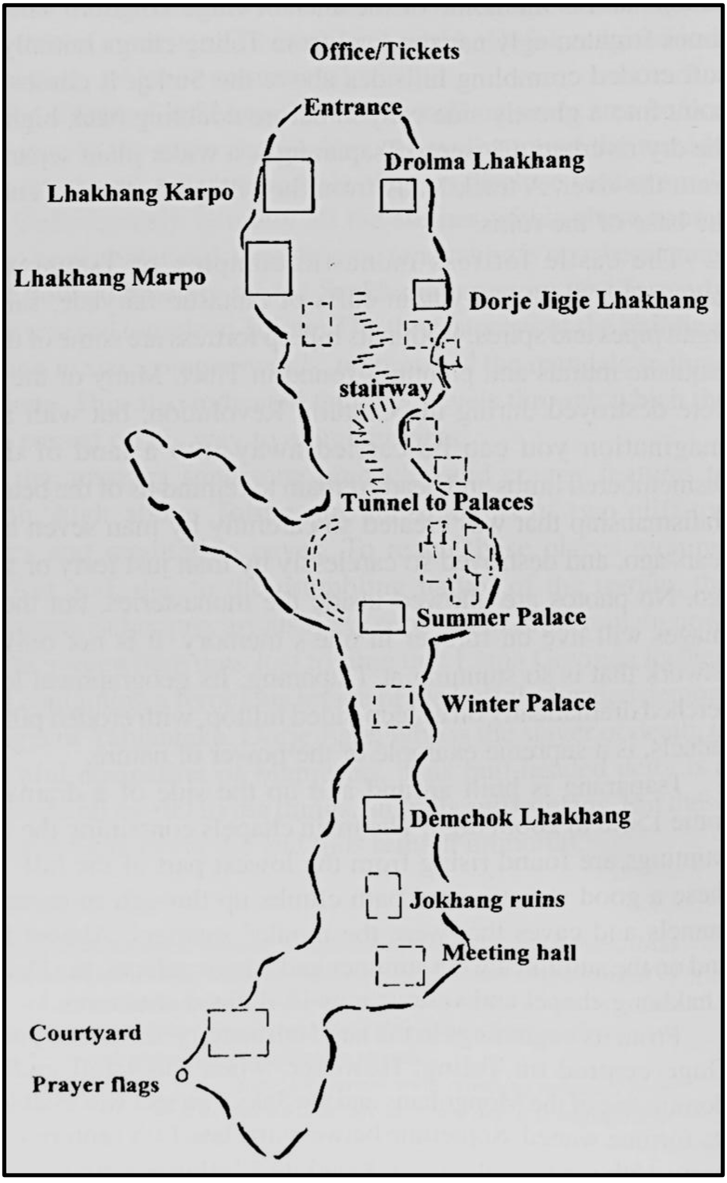
The first chapel to visit is the Drolma Lhakhang, known as the chapel of perfection. The white Tara is the main deity in this chapel, attributed to a Regent of Tsaparang. Paintings probably date from the 16th century. Inside are Sakyamuni flanked by two disciples, Tsong Khapa, Atisha and amazing depictions of animals, snow lions and bird images. Aspects of Guhysamaja are seen on one wall.

Lhakhang Marpo

The next large chapel uphill is the Lhakhang Marpo, or red chapel. According to records, this chapel was built by Queen Dondubma, the wife of Lobsang Rabten, sometime around 1475. Some of the paintings in this building may be as many as six hundred years old. The wooden carved doors are regarded as being original. The mantra *'Om Mani Padme Hum'* is cut into the doors.

Inside on the walls are images of Chenresig, Tara and Manjushri. On the right are the famous depictions of the life of the Buddha, which are seen in both the white and red chapels. Eight Medicine Buddhas, the Dhyani Buddhas and a green Tara are also seen here. Close to the doorway are Vajrapani, a red Mahakala and Ushnisha-Vijaye. These paintings are regarded as the most extensive such images in world. Also in this building are eight chortens, still mostly intact; the *toranas* with typical bird *makaras* are also on view in differing states. On the left wall are scenes of the builders who constructed the temples. There are some exquisite Kashmiri miniatures, with some obvious turbaned guests.

Plan of Tsaparang


Office/Tickets
Entrance
Drolma Lhakhang
Lhakhang Karpo
Lhakhang Marpo
Dorje Jigje Lhakhang
stairway
Tunnel to Palaces
Summer Palace
Winter Palace
Demchok Lhakhang
Jokhang ruins
Meeting hall
Courtyard
Prayer flags

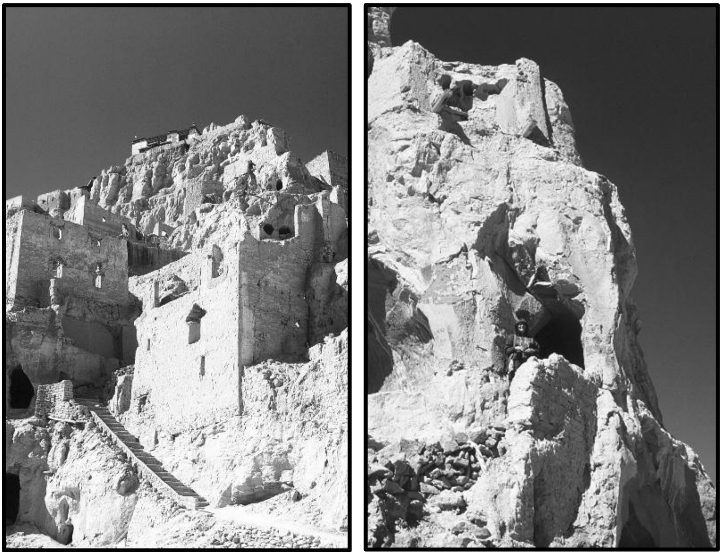
Dorje Jigje Lhakhang

This smaller chapel is the house of the wrathful deity Yamantaka, known as Dorje Jigje in Tibet. It once housed a ferocious image of this buffalo-headed demon. There are some amazing gold-painted images in this chapel. Deities displayed include Kye Dorje (Hevajra in yab-yum), Demchok (Chakrasambhava), Sangdu (Guhysamaja), the Green Tara and Mahakala from the supreme Yoga Tantra. Also here are Tsong Khapa, Drolma (Tara), Maitreya and Kubera riding a snow lion. The use of gold in here is stunning.

> A whole world of fantastic and terrifying visions is symbolised in these pictures, in a manner so vivid and powerful, that in these temples one almost feels transported into an unreal world of nightmare and anguish. As if all the terrors of a people pictured there, evoked by the sacrilegious violators of the silent recesses, would like to leap forth from the walls and come to life and drag one into their dances.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Tsaparang Dzong or Citadel

These can be reached after the ruins of the monks' quarters by an almost hidden tunnel which starts at the base of an insurmountable cliff. A couple of windows on the west side open out to give a stupefying view down the cliffs. Care is needed. Once out of the passage staircase is the flat-topped summit of the hill complex.



Access to the citadel is exciting!

Summer Palace

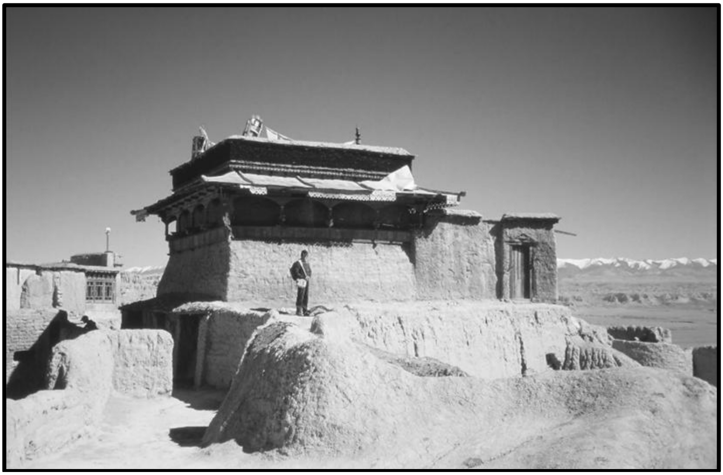
The Summer Palace, which has been mostly restored, has an amazing view over the valley of the Sutlej. As far as the eye can see is a sea of weirdly eroded castle-like bands stacked one upon the other. Towering above are the snow-covered mountains that eventually link into the Zanskar and Ladakh ranges further northwest. There is little in the way of furniture inside, but the walls have been painted. A low-walled balcony offers a sunny perch used by the royalty to keep warm. The drop is sensational, and this is not a good place for those with vertigo.

Winter Palace

The winter palace might easily be missed, for its access is hidden and very steep. It’s so steep and narrow that a cable has been installed to assist the climb down the eroded staircase. The palace, which must be some 20m or so underground, is a very cold, eerie place. Some of the ceilings are so low you might end up crawling from room to room and tunnel to tunnel. You’ll almost certainly have to take off your rucksack to get through the tunnels. Being underground, this palace avoided the extreme cold of the outside winter. It is quite hot here in the Sutlej valley in summer, so no doubt the palace was also useful to avoid that heat.

Demchok Lhakhang

The Demchok ‘Mandala’ Lhakhang is the smallish red chapel on the top here, accessed by steps and a platform area. Restored images are found on the exterior. This chapel was undergoing repair at the time of our visit unfortunately (or else the caretaker was fatigued by climbing up here too often!)



Demchok Lhakhang

Inside the chapel was once a three-dimensional mandala dedicated to Demchok. The paintings here have been well preserved, by all accounts. Deities here are Demchok, Mahakala, Hevajra, Sangdu (Guhysamaja). Each deity belongs to the cycle of the Yoga Tantras. This temple could be five hundred years old.

A late 15th century image of Vairocana is located on the back wall according to Michael Henss, who photographed this chapel in 1994. The large open area on the top at the southern end is thought to have been the meeting hall, which was once covered. At the extreme top end are some prayer flags with a great view and a great drop.

Lotsang Lhakhang

This is the ruined chapel and chorten which can be seen across the small river valley to the north. To reach these ruins, head down from the entrance area into the valley below. It can be a little tricky, since there are small gullies which are hard to cross, and the surface of the ground is loose in places. Once in the valley, be sure to avoid wet feet where a small stream runs, and parts are boggy. There is an obvious path up to the ruins.

The whole area is dotted with caves, former mediation caves, a rabbit warren of troglodyte settlements. There are caves housing the tsa-tsa (clay encased remains) of important lamas and civic figures.

Normally photography is not allowed without permission from Beijing!

Views of the Sutlej Valley from Tsaparang citadel summit

Toling to Darchen

There are a couple of routes from Toling to Darchen; the southern route described earlier, which is longer and slower, but closer to the Himalaya, and the northern one, which joins the main road to/from Ali. Both routes are spectacular, so try to go one way and return the other way if possible.

Leaving Toling on the northern route, the road crosses the River Sutlej on new bridge next to an ancient chain bridge. The road climbs on to a shelf above the eroded region, with stunning views of the Indian Himalaya. The views extend from Nepal to Ladakh. Drokpa nomads camp on hillsides below the high pass, well over 5500m. Once over a steep pass, (at 110km) it is downhill for 11km to the main road at 125km from Toling. There is a Tibetan teahouse where you can take some limited refreshments.

The main road from to Darchen is in good shape and fast (Km1215 to Km1335 in 2hrs.) The Tirthapuri junction is further east at Moincer. It takes about 6–7 hours to cover the 240km on this day.

Road improvements continue to be implemented, making some journey times even less.

Above Toling the road snakes over a pass to join the main road from Pangong Lake to Lhasa. Views of the Indian Himalaya are sublime

Hidden Guge

West of Tsaparang there are few roads and it's a sensitive area being close to the border of India. The Shipki La pass, which lies above the Sutlej, was the main entry crossing into Tibet before 1959, and is located east of Nako and Po, above Namgia in upper Kinnaur.

Nako village is the trailhead for the Shipki La on the Indian side

Close to the Shipki La and the Indian border, a number of other noted monasteries existed in Guge. The **Tashigang** monastery beyond Nako was a large structure built on a former 11–12th century fortress. The formerly imposing, impregnable monastery effectively welcomed pilgrims from Spiti into Tibet. It is now just on the Indian side.

> the gorge is a veritable abyss, bound by a vertical wall along whose side runs a mere suggestion of a path which looks out over empty space… at 2pm we are on the pass and two hours later we enter the village of Shipki.
> ***Cave of a Thousand Buddhas,* Giuseppe Tucci**

Also close to Shipki is **Tiak**. Tiak may have been the birthplace of Yeshe O; its monastery has all the hallmarks of Rinchen Zangpo and the early Guge period. Miang, little more than a few houses, was once a larger settlement with a large dzong. Tucci found evidence mentioning King Sengge Namgyal of Ladakh here. **Kyunven/ Ranyi** or, more commonly, **Radnis**, the probable birthplace of Rinchen Zangpo, lies close to the Sutlej but is apparently often inaccessible.

At **Nu** Tucci found two chapels containing murals of an unknown age, but thought to be older than the 17th century. A castle here might have belonged to the Mon, who probably came from Kinnaur.

Ancient chortens once clustered in profusion around **Luk**, whose gompa was dependent on Toling. Once an important city, at the time of Tucci's visit it was almost abandoned with just a few houses. The Gelug-pa gompa had beautiful frescoes, well preserved. Tucci remarked, *'it has splendid examples of the ancient painting of Guge.'* He discovered images of Vairocana, Avalokiteshvara, Amitabha, Gonpo and three images of the Medicine Buddha.

Other significant Guge monasteries remains at the time of Tucci's visit were in the **Jangtang** valley, characterised by many troglodyte caves. The ruins of a Guge temple called **Drilchung** and mentioned in the chronicles of Rinchen Zangpo are here. **Rabgyeling** monastery must have been an important shrine in the past; it later came under control of the Sakya-pa. Rabgyeling was dominated by three large chortens and was formerly a fortress-style monastic centre.

Shangtze was the summer capital of the prefecture of Tsaparang and was located to the north. In former times under Guge it was evidently quite heavily populated with forts, civic buildings, houses and monasteries. Tucci found some paintings in caves close by relating to the golden age of Guge in the 11th century. Another former monastery of Rinchen Zangpo was at Shang, where Tucci found heaps of books and ancient manuscripts.

On the northern route out of Toling in the direction of Ali and Rutok are the cave complexes of **Dungkar** and **Piyang**.

The founding of the oldest temples at **Dungkar** is accredited to a daughter of Yeshe O. Later, more development occurred under Tashi Choling from the 15th century. Not much remains today. There were a number of paintings in three different cave chapels here. In one, the 'cave of the lantern ceiling', are the remains of five large mandalas; in another were one thousand Buddhas plus Avalokiteshvara, and in another were one thousand Taras.

Piyang is about 3km from Dungkar. Yeshe O is linked to this place, where meditation caves are found, and to the oldest structure, the Karsak Lhakhang. The complex adhered to the Sakya-pa. Some art historians have suggested the artwork here bears resemblance to that found along the Silk Route in northwest China, at Beziklik and Gaochang near Turfan and at Dunhuang's Magao caves. Some Tantric murals are over a thousand years old.

South of Tsaparang is **Toshang**, another remnant of the early Guge period, while to the west is the former location of **Khatze**, where Rinchen Zangpo did much of his translating. Tucci was unable to visit this place, but one of his party, a lama, did. Only one structure remained, apparently under the Sakya lama of Dungkar.

The village of **Richoba** is another place of historical interest. The head family here according to Tucci were astrologers, perhaps, to the court of Guge. They were called the Choba (Joba), hence the name of the village. A four-headed Sarvavid Vairocana of the 11th century with halo figures similar to that at Tabo existed here.

With so few recent visitors to this extreme western region of Tibet and little sign of the border from Spiti being opened, virtually no current information is available. What really remains today of ancient Guge in these remote regions?

During an archaeological dig throughout 1998–99, the Chinese found over twenty tombs that appeared to date back to the Shangshung period, well before the emergence of Guge.

In the region of western Tibet, many mysteries remain.

People of rural Tibet

CHAPTER NINE

Guge and Mustang

To the south, across the border in Nepal, is the once-isolated region of Mustang. It was a separate kingdom until 1951. Accessed from Nepal, it has close links to Tibet here. The prolific Kashmiri art of Guge is also found in some caves across Mustang.

Lo Manthang was a major centre during the Guge era. Most of its colourful monasteries though belong to the later Sakya-pa, with typical grey, white and yellow markings. North of the walled city of Lo Manthang is Garphu belonging to the Nyingma-pa. Samdruling, west of Lo Manthang, is Kagyu-pa, and Lori, east of Tsarang, is Druk-pa. The scenery of Mustang is also stunning. The upper Kali Gandaki and the Narsing Khola show similar erosional features to those displayed around Toling and Tsaparang.

Dunes, lakes and the Himalaya north of Mustang from the road between Nepal and Mount Kailash

History of Mustang

Although fairly peripheral to Western Tibet, much of the history of Mustang is inextricably linked to the Trans-Himalayan regions northwest of Lo Manthang. The history of Mustang is generally not very well documented and is patched together from manuscripts, texts and religious scriptures. Some scriptures called the Mollas seem to have been used to ascertain some of the more localised details. A lot of information referring to Mustang is found in the history of the greater Guge region of Western Tibet and the adjacent all-powerful region of Ladakh.

Many of the earliest historical facts of Tibet have come from the annals of Dun Huang, recorded by the Chinese Tang Dynasty from 618–907AD. The region of Mustang was first chronicled in literature discovered in 652AD in the Silk Route caves at Dunhuang, now in the Chinese province of Gansu, north of Tibet. It was once part of the Yarlung dynasty that stretched from Tibet into Central Asia. This was at the time of Srongsten Gampo, who is credited as being the founder of Tibet.

In the 10th century the original religious group of the Bon were in the ascendancy across Tibet. The demise of the Bon king Langdarma marked the rise of importance of Buddhism in Tibet and consequently in Mustang. Later a series of kings known as the Korsum dynasty of Ngari ruled. They came from Western Tibet, where the vast empire of Guge was soon to become a regional player. An emissary of Rinchen Zangpo visited Mustang in the later years of the 11th century.

As mentioned, the Guge kingdom was comprised of three regions: Ladakh (Maryul) including Spiti, Guge itself and Purang. Each was controlled by one of the three sons of Nyimagon. The Purang region extended as far east as Lo and Upper Mustang. The cultural, historic and religious connections between Guge and Lo are reinforced by the similarity of the art at Mentsi Lhakang (near Chuksang) and that found at Toling, Tabo (Spiti) and in Ladakh.

According to vague sources, a brief incursion hit the region in 1037. From southern Turkestan, located to the north of Ladakh, Muslim raiders known as the Quarakhanids appear to have made incursions across Western Tibet.

At the end of the 11th century, after the golden age of the Buddhist revival, there are references to the clans or tribes of the Menshang. They seem to have been the major local overlords of Mustang, although the region was still nominally under the hold of Guge. By the mid-12th century another clan called the Gungthang seem to have been in the ascendancy. Two other clans are also mentioned in some scriptures, the Nubri from lower Mustang and east towards Manaslu, and the more obscure tribe of the Mangyul, who probably lived in the Kyirong district.

Between the years 1230–40 a war broke out between the Gungthang clans and the Jumla kingdom of Western Nepal, known as Yartse to the Tibetans. By 1267, Dolpo, Lo (Mustang) and Gungthang had become one entity. The Menshang tribes appear to have reasserted their power briefly, as did the Jumla Malla kings. The Jumla kings held sway in the adjacent Dolpo region, where their power was more concentrated.

During most of the 13th century the ebb and flow of power between the main protagonists – the Gungthang, the Jumla kings and the Menshang clans – oscillated until 1370.

King Amapal (1388–1447) is generally accepted as the founding father of Mustang (the land of the Lo people) that exists today. Some scholars believe that his father Chos Kyongbum, who overran Purang, was instrumental in gaining the favours of the Gungthang clans with his superior military prowess.

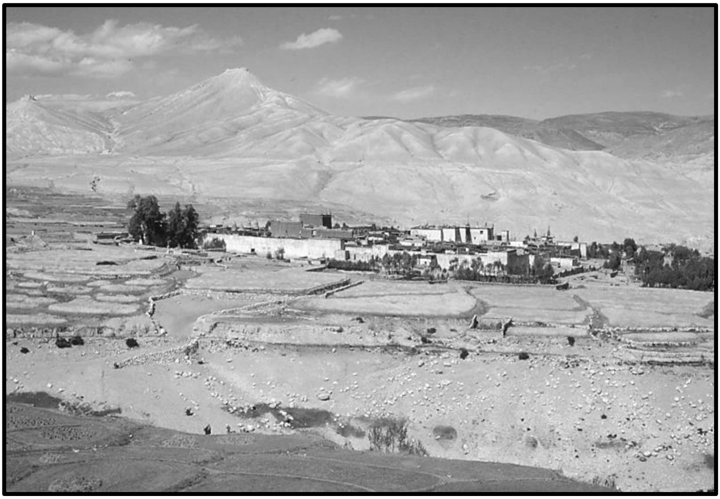
Others believe it was Amapal who extended the rule of Lo as far as Purang and Guge. Under Amapal, Mustang prospered through the trade between lowland Nepal and Tibet. With the rise of the Sakya-pa order in Tibet, Mustang adopted the same sect. Amapal is said to have laid the foundations for Lo Manthang in 1441.

One of the most influential figures in Mustang was the Buddhist master, Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (1382–1456), who was a master of the Sakya-pa sect. During the time of King Amapal, Ngorchen made his first visit to Mustang in 1427. After two subsequent visits the Ngor-Sakya-pa school gained more credence and remains evident in Mustang, where various cave and monastery images belong to the sect.

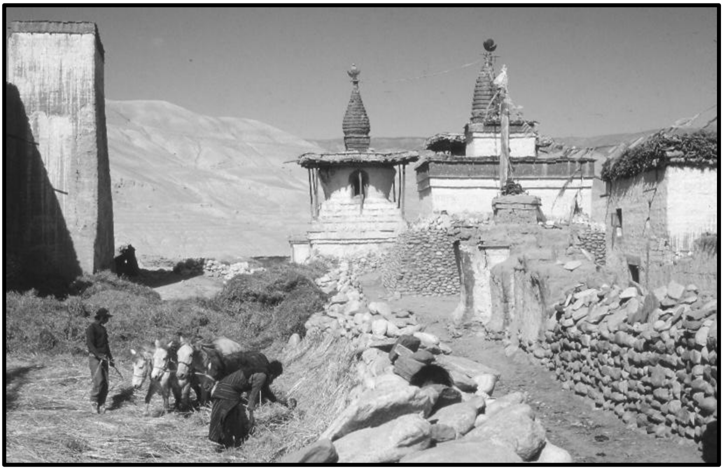
Agon Zangpo, the son of Amapal's second wife, extended the lands of Lo southwards after marrying a sister of the Guge king, Phuntshog. He appears to have ruled Lo from 1447 until around 1472, extending his influence into Purang. It is generally believed that Trashigon, the eldest son of Agon Zangpo, ruled until 1489. Purang was raided again by the Lo king Delegs Rgyamsho at the close of the 15th century. In 1505 a great earthquake hit the Himalayan region, but Mustang did not suffer as much as other regions. After this time the rulers of Ladakh appear to have been the chief protagonists in Guge, Purang and Lo.

Links with Ladakh influenced and enriched the cultural heritage of Guge and Mustang until 1768, when Prithvi Narayan Shah took control of the whole of Nepal. The Raja of Mustang joined the new state of Nepal but continued to rule independently. The kingdom of Mustang was very isolated from the middle hills of Nepal, although the Kali Gandaki remained a major trade route between Tibet and India.

After 1950, when Tibet fell under new masters, Khampa freedom fighters used the isolated valleys as bases. However, when Nepalese monarch King Birendra announced the 'Zone of Peace' initiative, they left Mustang. The land reverted to its former status as a peaceful forbidden last frontier. Sadly the turbulent years of the Maoist period and insurrections blighted the country and led to the resignation in 2008 of the last king of Mustang, Jigme Palbar Bistar.



The walled city of Lo Manthang, some years ago (1992) before the dirt road arrived



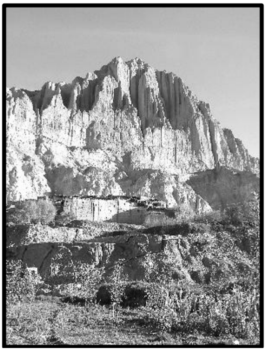
Lo Manthang, the capital of Mustang during harvest time

Exploring Mustang

Although less remote, with a rough dirt road linking it to Jomsom in the Kali Gandaki valley, Lo Manthang remains an amazing place. Its monasteries, narrow alleys, old traditional houses and ambience is very Tibetan.

Narrow alleys and monasteries define Lo Manthang

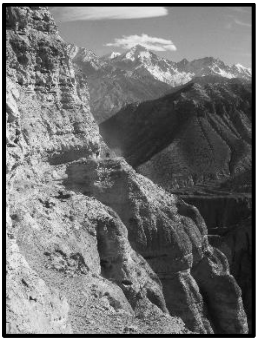
Until a border is opened between Lo Manthang and Tibet/China, visitors and trekkers will access Mustang from Jomsom (airstrip or dirt road) in the Kali Gandaki valley of the Annapurna region in Nepal. From Jomsom a 10-day trip including some hairy dirt road days will be enough to see the main highlights of Upper Mustang.



Tetang citadel **Mentsi cave nearby**

Entering Upper Mustang at Kagbeni, the trail/road heads through Chuksang, Samar, Ghami and Tsarang (a great place) to Lo Manthang. Some might want to divert to Tetang if not taking the eastern gtrail back from Lo Manthang. Trekkers can avoid the fairly quiet road virtually all the way by taking a trail from Samar via the cave retreat of Chungsi to Syangmochen and Ghami. Another trail then links Drakmar with Lo Manthang via Lo Gekar Gompa.

Returning south, the eastern trail is fabulous through Dhi, Yara, Luri Cave, Kumbum, Dhechyang and Tange. From here perhaps one of the most astonishing trails in the Himalaya climbs through Pa to the sensational Syarko Ridge. The descent to Tetang is no less incredible. A pass from Tetang via heads to Muktinath for a varied route via Lubra to Jomsom. Rarely-found Bon monasteries can be visited in Lubra and Thini near Jomsom.



Trail to Samar and Chungsi Cave

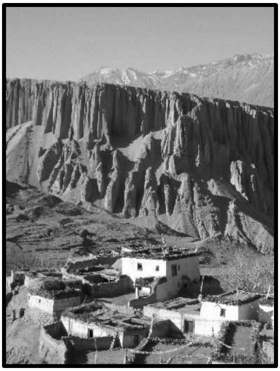
Khumjungar Himal borders Tibet, Mustang and Nar Phu area

Guru Rinpoche and lamas at Luri Gompa

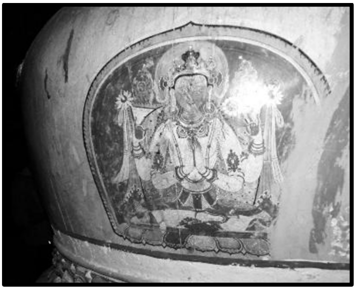
Tsarang, a major village

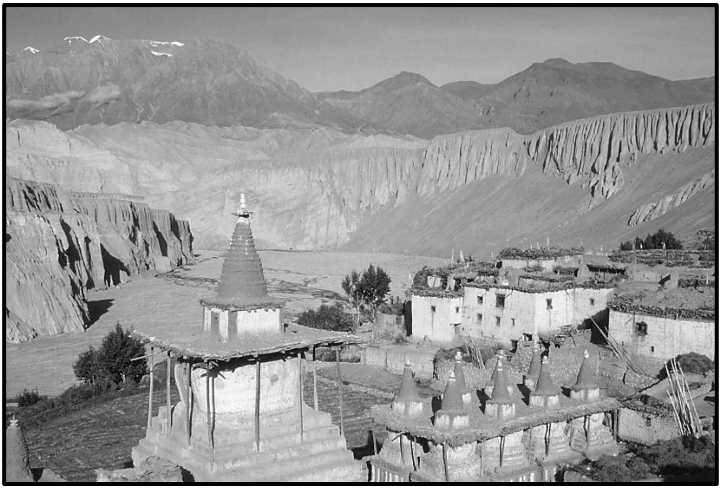
Lo Gekar monastery

Chosar caves north of Lo Manthang



A fabulous trail on the east side of the Kali Gandaki/Mustang Khola visits the village of Yara, and the cave monastery of Luri with rare Kashmiri art similar to that of Tsaparang



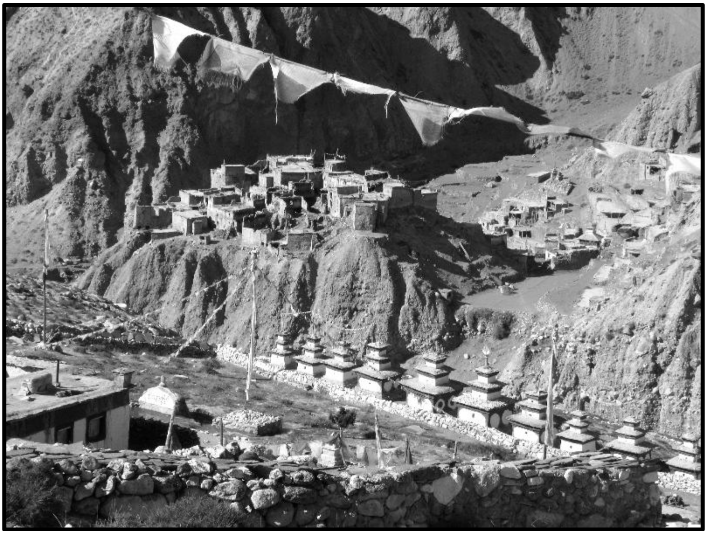


Tange: another isolated Tibetan-style village in Upper Mustang

The sensational scenery of Upper Mustang above Tange is reminiscent of the wild eroded Tibetan plateau north of the Himalaya around Toling

Erosion-sculpted ‘organ pipe’ scenery near Tetang, looking east to the Damodar Himal from the Syarko Ridge

Phu village in the Nar-Phu valleys of Annapurna marks almost the eastern extent of the Guge influence in Nepal



Tashigang monastery sits high above Phu

CHAPTER TEN

West Nepal

Limi and Guge

Culturally, geographically and adjacent to the Kailash region is the remote and little-known region of Limi in far northwest Nepal. From a pass on the northern frontier of Nepal, Mount Kailash can be seen; it's that close. The fabulous ancient, intact and fully operational monasteries of Til, Halji and Jang are Buddhist gems that are worth a trip just to see how the Tibetan culture survives with all its graphic exuberance outside Tibet. Tantric themes are present here as vividly as anywhere across the greater region. The imagery and intensity of the monastic traditions are stunning.

The mountain scenery is strikingly different in some ways from the plateau to its north. The Limi Valley is a rugged gash that hides its treasures well, requiring huge effort and patience to reach. High passes guard this lost Shangri-La of Nepal.

Introduction

A few groups depart from the Kailash region to West Nepal, where the direct trail takes just under a week to reach the airstrip at Simikot. Other groups cross from Nepal to reach Kailash. Those with bags of time and cash can trek via the Limi Valley in either direction between Kailash and Simikot.

The Limi Valley is probably the most popular trek in West Nepal at the moment. Trekkers bound for Mount Kailash and the Guge Kingdom in Tibet follow part of the route. The trail hugs the dramatic canyon of the Humla Karnali, often high above the tumbling waters far below. The Limi Valley is a wonderland of isolated villages, remote hermitages and spectacular scenery. Enough of the ancient culture remains intact to entrance everyone who dares to get this far away from civilisation. The historic interest is related to the high Tibetan plateau to the north.

The geography of the valley and its adjacent areas is totally unique in Nepal. This is a region of desolate, uninhabited canyons, rocky cliffs, towering ridgelines, rolling grassy hills and jagged, unnamed snow spires. Away from Simikot and the Karnali Valley, there are very few villages. Barely discovered before 1993, when the first tentative group trekkers ventured here, the Limi Valley area remains a destination for those seeking a little-trodden adventure, away from the world. To the north are the spectacular snow peaks of the Chandi Himal, including Changwathang (6130m), bordering Tibet.

Planning

Because of its isolation, in order to avoid potential pitfalls, planning is an important issue. Look at the maps and there seem to be so many new roads around the area that trekking is a waste of effort. Nothing could be further from the truth. The nature of the terrain is sure to keep vehicles away from most of the region. The construction of the road between Simikot and Hilsa is almost complete, but the route is subject to extreme weather conditions. Landslides, snowfall, wild river crossings and the lack of reliable vehicles mean you are virtually assured of not using these roads for some time to come. In summer, a truck or two apparently travels from Jang to the Chinese border at the Laptse (Lapche) La pass, but this is unlikely to be of use to foreign visitors. Ask a local tour operator for the latest information if planning to drive in or out of the region.

Just getting to Simikot with sufficient food stocks is quite an operation. Coming from Tibet, be prepared with food. There are virtually no shops en route, little extra food to buy and almost no lodges that one would recognise as a trekkers' lodge. This is definitely a camping-based, full crew trekking area. Take piles of goodies and be prepared to enjoy a diet of red rice, potatoes and spinach for a few days at least. It is possible to stay in local houses between Simikot and Hilsa. In the Limi Valley there are no designated overnight resthouses, and once beyond Jang, only a tent will suffice. Those crossing into Tibet will find basic hotels in Taklakot, Manasarovar and Darchen below Kailash.

You might think that this region, being so close to the barren uplands of Tibet, would be dry and sunny. Although this can be the case, in fact the nature of the geography seems to pull in far more moist air, cloud, rain and snow than might be desirable. The main season for trekking here is much later than in the rest of Nepal, commencing in May. Snow blocks the two high passes of the Nara La and Nyalu La well into early May. Trekking in early June is said to be a good time, before the monsoon hits the Simikot hills in mid-June.

As for the autumn season, it seems that early September to mid-October is the finest time, with more clear days than in the spring. That said, nasty storms from the Bay of Bengal do occasionally disrupt the best-laid plans. Snow is common in late October, but that's a chance that one might take to get super clear skies. By November the locals are safely down from the high pastures, as the temperatures plummet and snow blankets the region once more.

Everyone coming here needs to be as fit as possible, the trails are totally uncompromising. The ascents are steep, with some massive height gains, and the descents long and knee-crunching.

Parts of the trail in the Limi Valley itself are narrow, exposed and fabulously exciting. These trails get to those parts that others cannot reach. That said, it’s not all hardship; the upper Limi Valley above Til is easy and delightful. The charm offensive continues to Traktse, where the northern border areas are high but reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands without the whisky and bagpipes.

The shortcut trail between the Nyalu La pass and Simikot is yet another wild and rugged area, where the trails, although along the ‘would-be’ road, are exceedingly tough. Unless the weather is good, there is little chance to take many side trips and add yet more toil and trouble (or torture) to an already hard march.

The altitude is not as high as some treks, generally around 4000–4500m; the highest pass is the Nyalu La (5001m). Fortunately the gain in altitude is spread over a week before the highest areas are encountered. Any responsible trekking outfit should provide at least one rideable horse along with the mule train needed for the supplies, in case of difficulties with altitude or sickness.

Occasionally bad weather can delay flights into or out of Simikot for a few days. There’s little point in allowing more than one extra day in Nepalganj, although a few days in Kathmandu after the trek would reduce the pressures of any delays. Buses run frequently from Nepalganj to Kathmandu.

Itinerary and routes

With a few variations, the route is still the same as the original trekkers discovered when the region first opened in 1993.

Due to the nature of the terrain, weather and flights, allow three weeks for this trek. Being a triangular-circular route, there is a choice of direction. We took the clockwise option from Simikot, heading first along the Karnali over the Nara La (4560m) to Hilsa and then climbing along the upper Karnali to the Limi Valley. From Traktse the route heads south over the Nyalu La (5001m) to the Tshongsa (Salli) Khola. Here there is a choice of routes. One is to return down the Salli Khola to Kermi and thence to Simikot. The other harder but better route is over the Sechi La (4530m) and then via Lek Dinga, Yakba and Okhreni to Simikot.

Crossing the Nyalu La means a transition from the summer grasslands to the rugged, eye-wateringly steep cliffs and hillsides of the deep valleys that cut through the Himalaya north of Simikot.

An extremely interesting, and culturally unique area, just east of Simikot, is the Nyinba Valley(s) and its villages. Tibetan in origin, the Buddhist people here have some customs that are interlaced with Shaman and Bon themes. This area also hosts the famous Raling Gompa, one of the most important shrines in West Nepal.

Getting to Kailash from Kathmandu via West Nepal

The route below is the shortest direct trail to the border at Hilsa. Allow up to 10 days from Kathmandu and about 7–8 days for the trek. With the prospect of the road being usable soon, allow less but keep a few days spare in case of landslides.

Simikot to Hilsa Trek Summary

Start	**Simikot** (2985m)
Finish	**Hilsa** (3647m)
Distance	approx.90–100km
Time	7–8 days
Maximum altitude	**Nara La** (4560m/14,960ft)
Trekking style	Camping, homestay
Transport	Plane + maybe jeep/truck

Kathmandu – Nepalganj 1hr

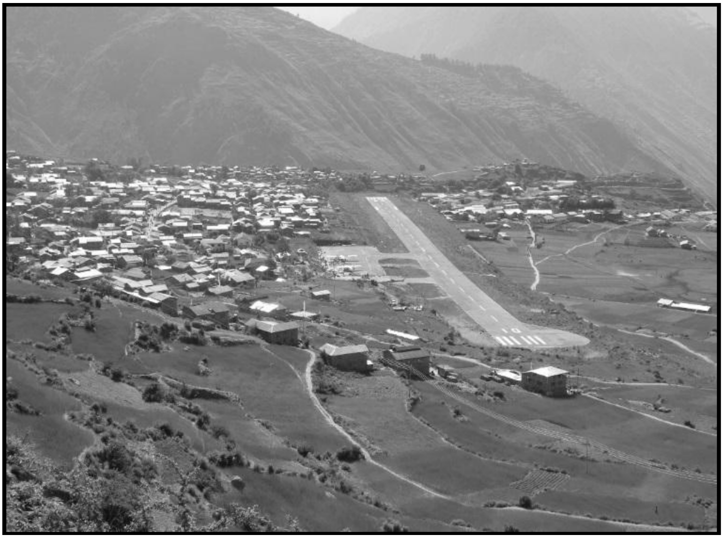
From Kathmandu the flight to Nepalganj (Nepalgunj) takes just under 1hr. In Nepalganj, it is necessary to stay near the airport or en route to town. The choice of hotels is limited, unless you want to start your adventure with freeloading bedbugs. Malaria cannot be ruled out, even for those staying just one night (it could be more nights if flights are cancelled in bad weather), so be prepared, with tablets, coils or mosquito repellent. Nets are provided in some hotels but check them for holes. Isn't adventure travel a pain at times!

Say a prayer before the flight!

Nepalganj – Simikot 50mins

The flights leave shortly after dawn, so it's an early wake up call. Try to get some breakfast before going to the airport; there is not a great selection at the check-in area. Say good-bye to the heat and carry warm clothing for the sudden cold of Simikot. Note that the baggage allowance from Nepalganj is only 15kg including hand baggage – barely enough for all those chocolate bars and sleeping bag.

Wear your fleece and don't be fleeced! Extra kilos for tourists' baggage might be charged at double the local rate. In the pilgrimage season, there can be 6–8 flights a day or more. With luck there will be views east towards Dhaulagiri and Churen Himal. To the west before landing you might catch a glimpse of Api, Nampa and Saipal. The final approach along the Humla Karnali valley is more than exciting!



Simikot airstrip – hold your breath!

Simikot (2985m) is developing quite rapidly into a fair-sized settlement. The best lodges are north of the airstrip, where Indian pilgrims bound for Lake Manasarovar and Kailash usually stay – Sun Valley and Kailash Humla Hotel. Other less expensive places near the airstrip are the Ten Peaks Inn and Hotel Gateway. Nearby are the Nava Jhyoti, Hotel Simikot Inn, Raling Hotel, Manasarovar Lodge and Tibetan Hotel.

Higher up is the Nyinba Resort – really a homestay, but clean and cosy. It's not far from the Bon Cultural Society.

Simikot

There are a couple of small village monasteries around Simikot and a Hindu temple set on the south side beyond the runway. Much of the 'town' sits on the east side of the airfield with some steep alleys leading to quite prosperous looking stone houses. The traditional area is southeast of the main bazaars. It has many flat-roofed mud and wood house. The majority of the people who live in and around Simikot are Chhetri, Khas, Jad, Tibetans and Thakuris.

Simikot – Dharapori 4½–5hrs

The first few steps are a bit of a shocker this early in the trek, as the trail climbs from Simikot to a viewpoint overlooking the settlement. A long 900m descent ensues before the route follows the Humla Karnali River to Dharapori.

The trail leaves Simikot, climbing to **Simikot Lagna** (3270m), where a few houses have a great view. Immediately the trail drops down steeply towards the Karnali River, through the traditional village of **Syada** (Shanda) and down to **Panauli** (2875m). The trail is quite rocky and challenging in places to **Dharaphaya** (2560m). Walnut and apricot trees shade the way as the route comes to **Majhgaon** (2503m).

Tuling is another 30mins down and hosts a shaman shrine with bells and strips of material hang from the roof beam. The Yakba Khola is crossed just before the settlement of **Dharapori** (2360m).

Dharapori – Kermi 4½–5hrs

Once up and out of Dharapori, the trail climbs easily. Kholsi is seen high above and just around here on the opposite bank are the features known as the **Three Fishes**. The path continues up to the steel bridge just below **Gadapari** (2395m). It's a steady climb up to the two teahouses of **Chankhil**. After a waterfall the path has been chiselled out of the cliffs. It's OK, and after this the trail climbs over cliffs in zigzags.

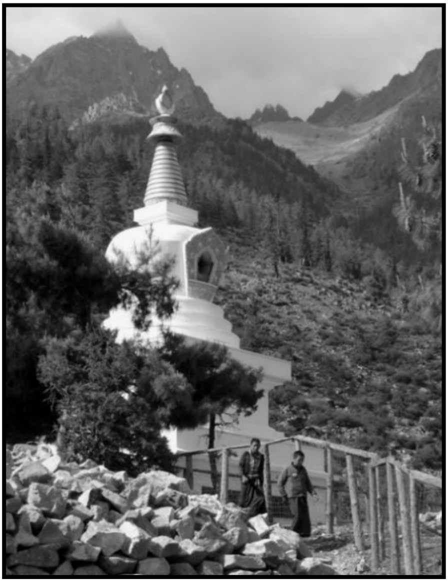
Chiselled out trail above the Karnali

A wide track ‘road’ now climbs to a teahouse called **Kambulapchi** (2588m). An easy trail follows, passing scattered farmhouses. On the right, look out for the pointed outcrop called **Thadodhunga** (literally sharp rock). The village of **Kermi** (2860m) is above the trail and so are the hot springs.

Kermi – Yalbang 5–6hrs

The walk begins with an easy 15min stage before heading uphill on a wide zigzag track to some houses at **Okharthala** (2998m). A steady climb through wooded areas leads on to the teahouse at **Salli Lagna** (3131m). A steep descent follows on a rough path down to **Salli Lodge** (2978m). A tricky but short path drops through pines to the valley floor and the suspension bridge over the **Salli Khola** (2897m) for lunch.

The route follows a wide track ‘road’ into beguiling forest, opposite some dramatically etched cliffs. Keeping close to the swirling waters of the Karnali, the trail negotiates a way around the cliffs, spurs and ridges on the north bank. The large open meadow below is called **Yalbang Chaur**. A colourful open-air bazaar used to take place here in November between the traders of Taklakot in Tibet and the Humla district. The trail climbs steadily to the lower houses of the very spread-out clusters of **Yalbang** (2890m).



Yalbang chorten

The old village cluster is set beneath a big outcrop below the trail.

The path climbs through the newer areas of the settlement, up beside a mani wall and under some shady trees to some large, prosperous-looking houses.

There is a camping area below the school and Himalayan Children’s Society complex, all set below the monastery.

To visit **Yalbang monastery** (3116m), a further ascent is required to the mani wall and large white chorten above.

Yalbang Monastery

Yalbang monastery belongs to the old Nyingmapa sect that follows Guru Rinpoche; it is surrounded by a large courtyard. The influence of the Nyingmapa here dates from the time of Degyal Rinpoche, who came from the Namkha Khyungdzong monastery near the source of the Karnali in Tibet. Currently around 200 monks and nuns of all ages study here. The usual four guardians are painted on the entry walls, along with a wheel-of-life. Above the door are images of Chenresig, Vajrapani and possibly a yellow Manjushri. Inside along the back wall are a three-headed image locally called Pupa, Guru Rinpoche, and Shariputra, left of the large Buddha. Maudgalyayana, Dorje Samba (in the yab-yum embrace, dancing on a body) and Throma Nagmo, a Buddhist emanation of Kali, are to the right. Along with a picture of the Dalai Lama, there is an image of the Dudjyom Rinpoche. He reportedly sent out three emissaries to spread the faith. Notable wall paintings depict Guru Rinpoche, the life of Buddha, a demon of the lake and various fire demons. Holy books fill the gaps. This building was refurbished in 1986. For more information about the legends and stories associated with Yalbang, see the book Kailash Mandala by Tshewang Lama.

Yalbang – Lower Tumkot 5½–6½hrs

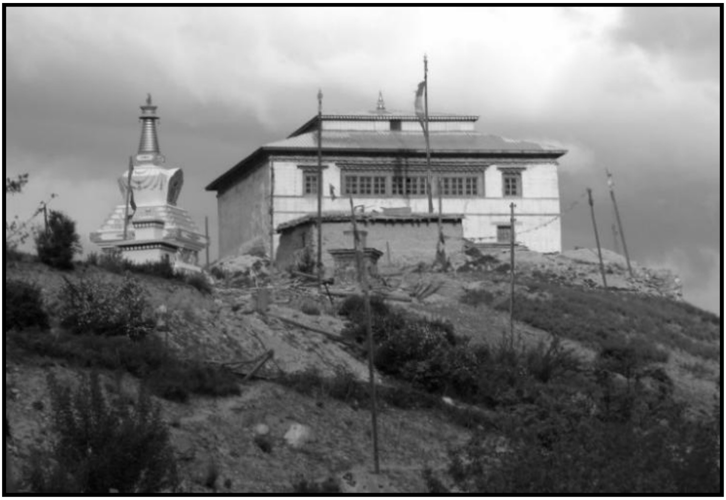
The route continues around the rocky hillside for about 45mins to the picturesque, traditional village of **Yangar** (3015m). There is an entry kani, chortens and flat-roofed houses to photograph. High above to the north is a nunnery and hostel for schoolchildren who live too far for a daily march to lessons.

An easy walk follows, for a while at least. The path is near the river and at times up or down around cliffs of multi-coloured creamy outcrops with orange bands and yellow layers. The Karnali River is squeezed into a narrow canyon with reddish-brown cliffs; near here is a teahouse that serves as a good lunch spot. It’s about 3hrs walk from Yalbang.

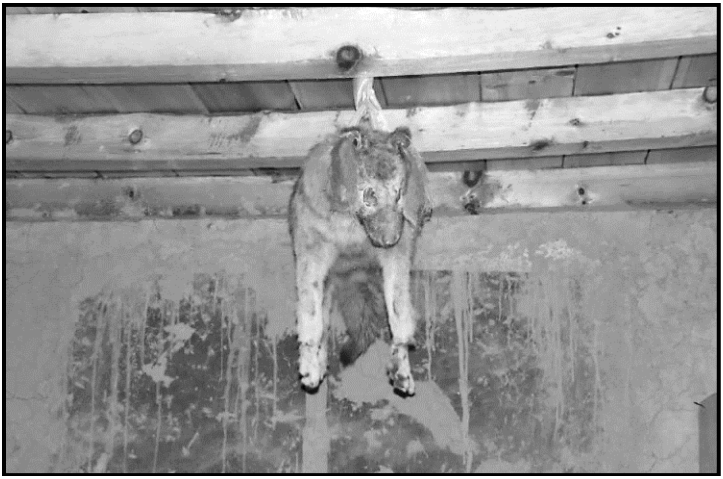
The trail now climbs steeply over a landslide area and continues to the **Karnali bridge** (2981m). Inevitably it’s up again to a building and stream. The countryside is more barren to **lower Muchu**. At the junction, go right for the checkpost and Tumkot trail. Go left, steeply up, to see more of **Muchu** (3145m) and its ancient gompa (**Mota Gompa** on the maps). A significant chorten is hidden up here. From Muchu it’s mostly easy to **Lower Tumkot Camp** (3028m) below the Tumkot monastery hill.

Side trip: Tumkot village & monastery 2hrs

Be sure not to miss this gem of a side trip. Although there is a very steep, loose trail directly to the top of the monastery hill, it’s brutal and ill-advised for most. We did use it on the way down, as it was getting dark, but do be careful. **Tumkot** (3073m) is a small settlement perched on the ridge about 30mins up from camp. The monastery is 10mins stroll, passing farms on the way up to the welcoming chorten. There is a great view up the narrow defile of the **Karnali River Gorge** to the north as it carves a way down from Tibet. It’s a tricky 20min scramble down the steep hill back to camp.



Tumkot Monastery



Snow leopard at Tumkot Monastery

Tumkot Monastery

The monastery, called Dungkar Chorzom, belongs to the Sakyapa sect, so it's a unique spot in Humla and is about 700 years old. A couple of chortens stand before the monastery with a stupa decorated with four sets of snow lions associated with the deity here, Dorje Shugden. The gompa has been renovated incorporating the ancient version and has been enlarged with a wheel of life on view. The most striking object here is a stuffed snow leopard, a demonic looking beast with gaping jaws. Inside the main chamber it is dark and a little forbidding. Just inside the door, on the left is a Gelden Dorje painting. On the left wall are painted images of a fat lama, called Namu, various red hat lamas, a blue Dorje Chang (Vajrapani), a green Tara and the wise old man. The main icon, Sakya Kunga Nimbu, is also painted on the left wall. The main deities of the shrine are, from left to right, Hitum Dorje Shenla (the yab-yum image), Buddha, a thousand-armed Chenresig and Sangay Mela. On the right wall the paintings depict Shariputra, Sangay Mela again and Maudgalyayana. Dorje Samba is the last obvious portrait. The monastery is under the care of Gyatso Lama (also called Tukchen Gyaltso) and his family has had continuous stewardship of this building for 14 generations. If he is around you will certainly enjoy some interesting snippets of information. He studied in Dharamsala and Bangalore.

Now, as legends recall, there is more about this intriguing place.

The legends of Dorje Shugden

Anyone who follows the news from Dharamsala will be aware of the Dorje Shugden controversy. Dorje Shugden was a lama at Drepung Monastery near Lhasa in the seventeenth century. He was a wise and learned sage with a considerable following in the monastery. This caused alarm amongst the higher lamas and they sought a way to kill him. Dorje Shugden was aware of the recriminations and was so distraught that he left to take his own life. He predicted that a black cloud in the shape of a hand would appear if he were innocent of any misdemeanours. This indeed happened and the state was soon engulfed by calamities, plagues and epidemics. The state called on the oracle to banish the evil demon that had caused all these ills. Eventually the reigning Dalai Lama (of the Gelug-pa sect) pardoned Dorje Shugden and all was happy ever after.

Except that many followers of the 14th Dalai Lama do not now accept this story and the controversy is not settled. The people of Tumkot accepted this legend from the time of the 5th Dalai Lama until recently. Today the local community merely offer gratitude to the Shugden as a powerful fiery deity.

Lower Tumkot – Yari East 5–6hrs

The big altitude gain makes this a tough day, and if you intend to cross the Nara La the next day on foot, it will be even longer. Ideally stay in Yari East before the ascent of the tricky Nara La and keep any spare day for later.

It's best to follow the road out of Lower Tumkot, as the path has been messed around by construction. A steady climb ensues to more level ground. There is a tremendous chasm down to the left, looking much like some in Upper Mustang. Ahead the 'road' is mostly level as it contours high around to **Pani Palbang** (3480m), which basically means chalk rocks. There are a few houses here for a cosy lunch inside. Around the corner the path climbs to some flags. The final stretch climbs less steeply to **Yari East** (3783m). There is a check post here, a few houses, the Tashi Delek Hotel and a camp below the settlement. The village gompa nearby belongs to the Nyingmapa sect.

Camp at Yari East

Yari East –Thadodhunga 4–5hrs

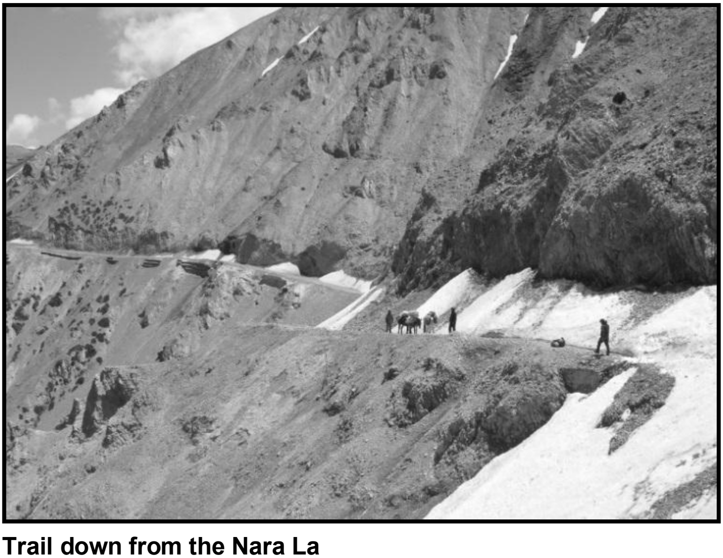
In normal circumstances it should be possible to hire a pickup truck here to take a group and crew up the Nara La as far as possible. If walking all the way, it's best to camp at Thadodhunga Camp en route, aiding acclimatisation. Some fast trekkers can make it to Hilsa, but it's necessary to be very fit and well acclimatised. There's a 900m climb and descent if doing this from Yari, and the distance is long.

From Yari East it's better to follow the road. The route heads into the Thadodhunga valley across streams, through yellow-flowered thorn bushes and meadows. It's a significant climb all the way up to the red outcrop known as **Thadodhunga** (4051m). Here is a small teashop, called Thadodhunga Hotel & Camp, of course!

Thadodhunga – Hilsa 6–8hrs

The Nara La is a tough pass to cross, as the distance is long and the descent can be blocked by snow late into the spring season. As mentioned, we took a truck to near the top, taking 1hr. The descent on foot took 4hrs with some hairy snow chutes to negotiate. Landslides close the road for much of the year. In autumn it should be better.

The climb from Thadodhunga is somewhat relentless, uphill to the meadow and basic rock wall shelters called **Sip Sip** (4310m). There are two here, with no roofs. The next hour or so is long, as the trail gradient is still considerable. The **Nara La** (4560m) is a windy place, where the prayer flags are buffeted by icy winds. Looking north from the pass are the jagged ridges that lead up to the **Nalakankar Himal** peaks. The old trail goes yet higher to avoid some snow chutes on the north side. About 10mins down the first views open on to **Zer**, the Tibetan village above the border on a shelf. Way further west, the green oasis of **Taklakot (Purang)** can just be glimpsed. Hilsa is occasionally in view far below, as well as the modern, glossy Chinese customs border building. A smooth, sealed road leads from the border to Taklakot and Kailash.



Trail down from the Nara La

In early season snow chutes might block the road, so care is needed. A long but easy descent along the road leads to the **Chor Lagna** (4087m) – even easier if trucks are running! The trail cuts corners and runs down the spur from which Hilsa can easily be seen. The path is steep and loose from here into a side canyon. There isn't really a path at the bottom of the side canyon, but eventually the houses of **Hilsa** (3647m) appear.

Hilsa is an anomaly, cut off from the rest of Nepal and looking to Tibet for sustenance. The big hotel on the left at the entry to the town is the Hotel Snow Lion. This is where most of the Indian pilgrims are briefly lodged before continuing higher and higher towards Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. Also in Hilsa are the Balung Resort, Hotel Manasarovar, Tsewang Hotel and Pema Guest House near the suspension bridge.

Locals of Humla can travel to Kailash with their citizen's card only. The border is open for foreigners, but all visas and permits must be obtained in advance in Kathmandu. A day trip into China is not yet an option.

The Taklakot (Purang) Valley

The valley leads west and north around the west shoulder of Gurla Mandhata to the Gurla Pass before dropping to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash.

Note: A dirt road is being carved between Hilsa and Simikot; construction is almost complete! Landslides are likely at any time.

Limi Valley Trek

Planning

In the past groups trekking around Kailash have taken a Nepalese crew, but changes have occurred over this arrangement, so it needs to be checked first. It is easier in terms of logistics to do this option starting in Simikot and trekking to Hilsa; it also enables good acclimatisation for Mount Kailash.

Coming from Mount Kailash, as some groups have done, the trail begins at the border at Hilsa. This does mean some advance planning – ideally the same staff can be used if a Nepalese crew is used on the Kailash trek. Otherwise, it means new crew members from Simikot, a very expensive and tricky arrangement. It is cheaper to head from Hilsa to Simikot via Tumkot, Yalbang and Dharapori, but the Limi Valley route is extremely interesting with its ancient monasteries and scenic passes, which will be easier with acclimatisation from Tibet already.

Limi Valley Trek Summary	
Start	**Hilsa** (3647m)
Finish	**Simikot** (2985m)
Distance	approx.100–110km
Time	10–11days
Maximum altitude	**Nyalu La** (5001m/16,400ft)
Trekking style	Camping
Transport	Plane

Hilsa – Manepeme 5–6hrs

This is quite a tough day, beginning with a big, zigzagging climb. Then follows a narrow, contouring path that is never quite on the level. Don’t look over the edge into the abyss of the upper Karnali canyon without stopping! The distractions are many – helicopters landing and taking off, buses and jeeps coming to the Nepali border, unacclimatised Indian pilgrims in red jackets, wobbling across the bridge to the buses that will take them even higher to the holy lake and mountain. If you’re lucky, lammergeyers & vultures may circle high above.

From the Nepali Customs a wide track climbs in zigzags for around 2hrs. Generally, avoid taking shortcuts as re-joining the track means scrambling high above the abyss on loose rocks and boulders. The trail reaches a **high point** (4027m) before reaching the true trail. There are views of **Zer** en route to this point. Beware of rockfall from blue sheep high above, and do stop to admire the views. The path dips into a dramatic side canyon with spectacular views down to the Karnali. The views west still offer glimpses into Tibet.

After another **high point** (4090m), the path drops steeply down a well-engineered route before the next climb, where boulders make progress tiring. Finally the path descends a little to the camp at **Manepeme** (3950m), surrounded by big boulders. On one of these is the inscription *Om Mane Padme Hum*, after which the place is named. Birds of prey circle, waiting for a trekker or blue sheep to falter.

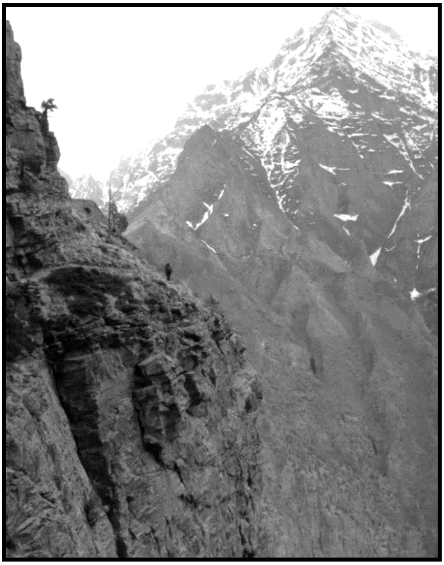
Camp at Manepeme

Manepeme – Tiljung 7–8+hrs

It's a very long, tough day as the trail climbs and descends often. The Namka Dzong cave is a highlight of the day and indeed the entire trek. The Namka Lagna pass is another high point, with the first views of the upper Limi Valley. The Phupharka Himal can also be seen ahead, beginning to show their rugged spires. Those with time might choose to camp at **Chyang Lungma** just below the Namka Lagna pass. The extra time can be spent visiting Til village, the monastery and then dropping to camp in Tiljung meadow**.** The following description applies to the long day option broken into two stages.

Manepeme – Chyang Lungma 5–6hrs

The first part of the walk is quite relaxed but quiet. We only saw three locals before Hilsa and only two between Hilsa and Til. It's a lonely trail. Various side gullies need to be negotiated, with views of drama-filled cliffs and chasms.



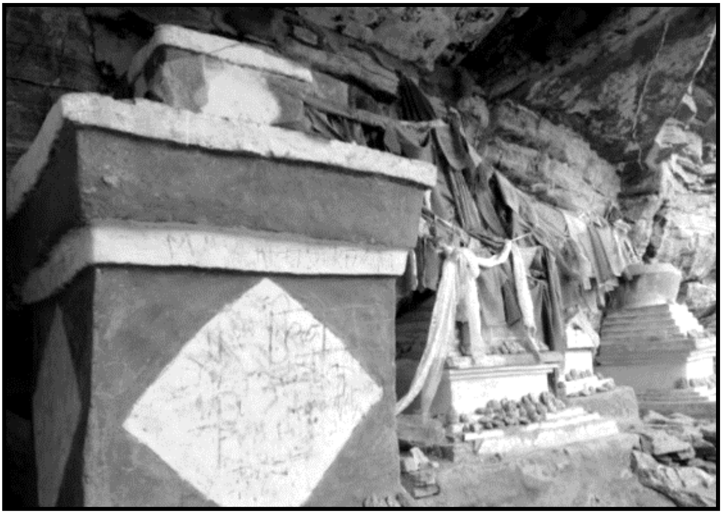
Siân above the abyss on the trail to Namka

Ancient, gnarled juniper guards the trail, birds of prey hover and the wind occasionally whistles an eerie tune through the deafening silence.

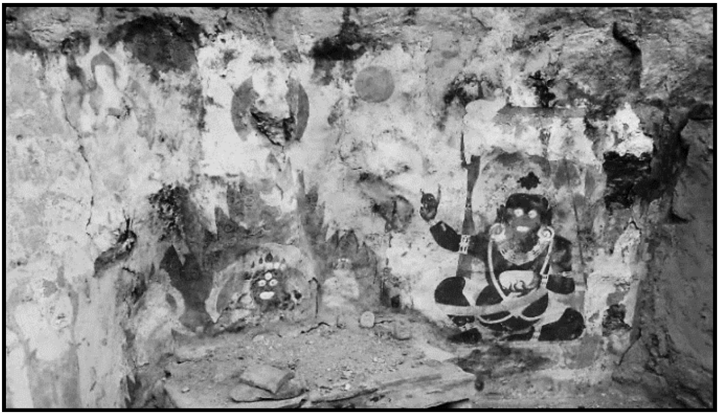
The path climbs to over 4030m before a narrow ledge stage and yet another jaw-dropping chasm.

The climbing never really stops, leading on to an overhang ‘cave’ feature just before a **high point col** (4140m).

The trail climbs and drops around to a junction (4109m). From here, an exposed path leads to Namka Cave, or there’s an even higher climb with the mules to the Namka La pass (4300m). What a choice! Don’t miss the caves if you can ignore the drops and occasionally exposed sections. Set on the ledge below the towering cliffs and above the abyss is **Namka Dzong cave** (4084m).



Namka cave chortens and artwork (below)



Namka Dzong Cave

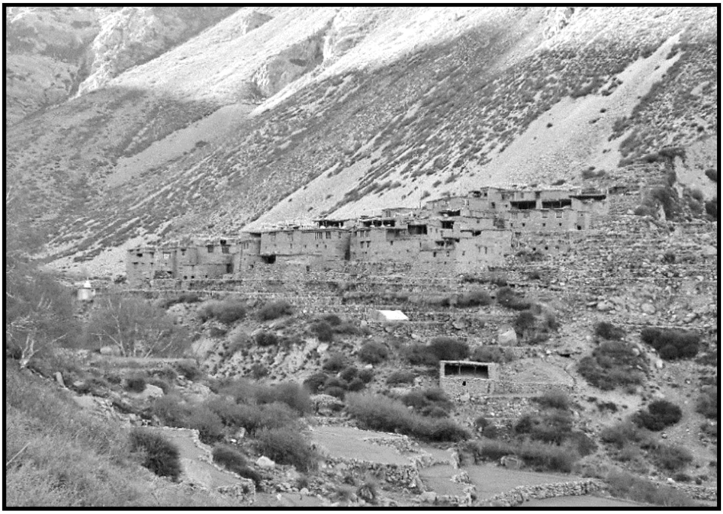
Not really a cave, but a ledge below an overhang, the site is home to around ten blackened stone shelters in a state of disrepair. Sages and hermits have used these in the past. Three chortens sit under the overhangs, with some faded but definable paintings. A mini kora runs behind the chortens. Some paintings are similar to the Mithila art from southern Nepal and north India. There is a fire demon image and a brown monkey-like icon. On the left are images of a wise man and two consorts. It is believed that Rinchen Zangpo came here from Guge in the 11th century, with some of his noted Kashmiri artists, to paint the images. Further along is the famed juniper stump that represents a dried-up spring. This is said to be the toothpick of Chenga Sherab Jungne, a disciple of Duisum Khenpa, the first Drigung Linga. Once upon a time the cave had two running springs. In the next shelter is a kitchen, and the last shelter houses the remains of the Rinpoche's retreat. The famous Nyingma-pa Lama, Tshog-khang Rinpoche, also meditated here.

Be careful leaving the cave area, as the path is narrow, and a slip would be harmful. The trail slogs up a ravine on a good zigzagging route to a **prayer flag col** (4236m) with glorious views along the Limi Valley. Not far down from here is the possible night stop at the **Chyang Lungma meadow area** (4200m). There's not much space, but there is running water.

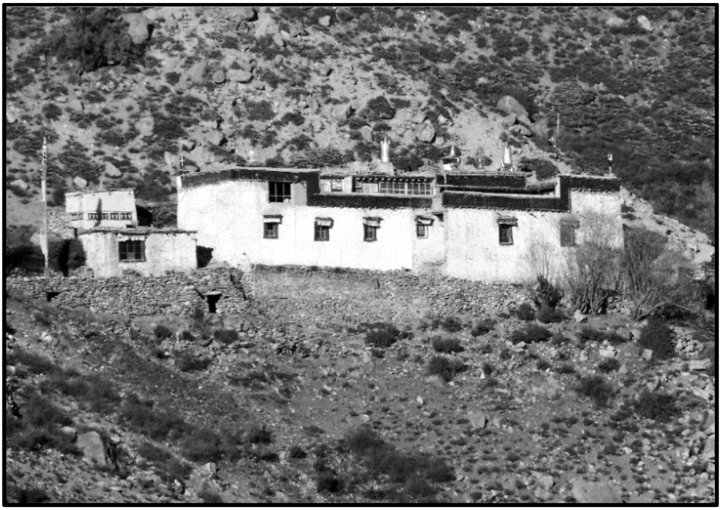
Chyang Lungma – Tiljung 3–4hrs

From Chyang Lungma the trail once again begins a long climb around the cliffs to another **high point** (4115m). Descending at last, the trail comes to **two chortens** set in a meadow above the Til valley. Til monastery is easily observed across the valley and to the northwest are the snow peaks of the **Nalakankar Himal**. A short descent leads to the **Til Rinpoche shrine**, where the choices begin.

The shortest option is to head down a roughly defined path directly to Tiljung **–** quite a drop on the steep grassy slope. A few zigzags, on an occasionally loose path, lead down to the delightful camping spot of **Tiljung meadow** (3580m) beside the charming Limi Khola river. For Til and the monastery the trail is gentle and easy, down around into the valley to kani gate of **Til** (3900m), an amazing stone-walled, almost fortified-looking village. The houses are closely intertwined, with narrow alleys, little sunlight and a mysterious atmosphere.



Til village and monastery



Til Gompa

As with the two other monasteries in the Limi valley, Til Gompa belongs to the Drigung-pa sect, a splinter school of the Kagyupa founded by Marpa. The Drigung came to rival the Sakya-pa sect after the death of Jigten Sumgon. It takes about 20mins to reach the gompa from Til. Above the main white building of the gompa is the Gonkhang and, higher still, the mediation retreat. The hillside behind soars to the sky with a few jagged spikes at the top.

Limi people

Limi means ‘people of the confluence’, which in this case means of the junction of the Traktse Khola and the Talung Khola near the ancient site of Tshamdo. Today only a few stone outlines remain of this place. The Limi people speak a version of Tibetan and follow the Drigung–Kagyupa Buddhist sect. Polyandry is common in the valley, mainly to control birth rates where fertile land is at a premium. A wife may have a number of husbands, who are brothers. Built mainly of stone, the typical Limi house is a three-storey structure. The lower level is used for livestock and the second floor is the main living area. The top floor is reserved for the puja room, where the favoured deities are kept. The lamas decide the auspicious time for sowing the crops and completing the harvest. The growing season is quite short, between May and September, due to the abundant snowfall in winter. Grazing rights for yaks and goats across the border in Tibet were lost in 1961. Today cross-border trade has once again opened in a limited way, mainly through Taklakot, south of Kailash.

The Nalakankar peaks define the border of Tibet and West Nepal in sight of Mount Kailash

Tiljung – Halji 2–3hrs

The walk to Halji is short and relaxing, with no big hills to negotiate. The trail climbs around a bluff to the bridge across the **Limi Khola**. Rich green meadows are crossed to a rockslide that is of no consequence on this mellow day. More boulders and meadows creep into the picture before a quaint **cantilever bridge** (3680m) that takes the route back to the north bank. The main path crosses fields to **Halji** (3741m), unless camping near the river.

Halji Gompa

Halji is the largest of the three Limi Valley villages and hosts the famous 1000-year-old Thubten Rinchen Ling Gompa. The complex is well hidden among the closely-knit stone houses of the village. It was once located higher up the valley, but suffered a fire. The monastery is mentioned in the ancient Kailash Chronicles.

Rinchen Ling Gompa

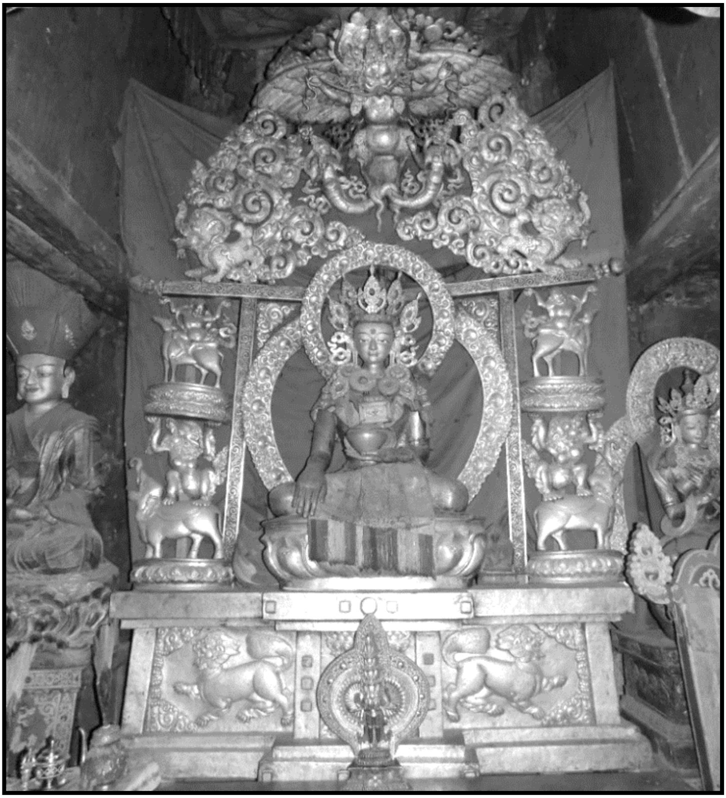
Rinchen Ling monastery is the most important gompa in the region. Belonging to the Drigung sect, the gompa once followed the guidance of the Sakya-pa. Later it came under the auspices of the Gyang Drag monastery of Mount Kailash in Tibet. The current incarnates of the senior Drigung lamas live in Dehra Dun and Lhasa. The monastery is 'guarded' first by a prayer wheel chamber. Inside is a large wheel and behind the drum is a 1000-armed Chenresig with Guru Rinpoche and Buddha further along.

The main gompa area is staggering; large black curtains hang before a steep staircase. There are three areas visitors can see. On the ground floor is the Rinchen Zangpo Lhakhang. The Gonkhang is up on the left on the first floor. The main Lhakhang is also on the first floor to the right.

The Rinchen Zangpo chamber is extraordinary, with a central four-sided image of Abchi Chhodron looking very similar in style to Vairocana in Ladakh, here called Namo Namse. On the left of the door inside are eight terracotta Buddhas, also reminiscent of Alchi in Ladakh and Tabo in Spiti, India. Three large Buddhas sit around further in – one is a standing image. On the back wall is the shrine to Rinchen Zangpo (985–1056AD). Six more terracotta images sit further round, with a large Green Tara next. Finally another five terracotta images sit serenely near the last wall before another Green Tara (the Green Taras are not very female-looking but we are told that's what they are). A steep stairway leads to the Gonkhang (chamber of the protectors), a dark, gloomy room with many fire-backed demons painted around the walls. Icons here include the red-faced image of Chhudong on a green horse, and a black Mahakala. The main image is Abchi Chhodron. Shangshung Chu is the next icon, a deity more likely associated with the Bon.

Images above the main chamber are Sangay Rabchen, Jampa (Maitreya), Chenresig, Mahakala (Channa Dorje here) and Dorje Samba. With six arms, the next icon is Namgyal Ma, then the red Tsepame. Tara or Drolma is the last of the line. Inside, the main icon is again Abchi Chhodron, depicted in a painting near the door. On the left are rows of holy books. Other icons are the Drigung lamas, Buddha, a 1000-armed Chenresig, Dorje Chang and three stupas.

Halji gompa terracotta statues



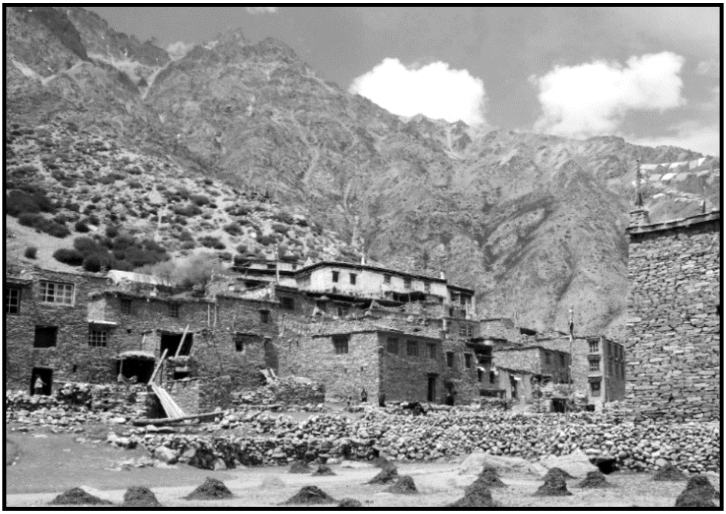
Halji Gompa, Abchi Chhodron image

The village of Halji is well worth exploring, with narrow alleys, some small tunnels and lots of friendly people. Further out are fodder enclosures for the animals. Take the red mani wall trail with a few chortens to the east of the village to locate the campsite at the southern end of the fields. It's only 15mins to the campsite, a walled area near a shady tree and chorten. The toilets defy description! Above the village to the north are three chortens said to be the chortens of the Drigung master, Duisum Khenpa.

Halji – Jang 4½–5½hrs

There is more ascent on this trail to the mysterious and exotic village of Jang. A wide track/road is encountered at Sunkarni, but the chance of meeting a wheeled vehicle is about nil. Only two trucks and a defunct Chinese pickup seem to exist on the road to Tibet from Jang via Traktse. The hot spring is almost 1hr east of Jang.

Leaving Halji, the trail climbs up above the long red mani wall and around below a large chorten. The chorten kani gate hosts some paintings of Tara, Dorje Chang and Chenresig, among others. The trail keeps generally close to the river through meadows and below the cliffs. For 1½hrs the trail keeps company with the river, on a good trail to a spur, then drops briefly and climbs to the next spur (3907m). The route encounters the so-called road just before the one-building settlement of **Sunkarni** (3880m). Following the 'road', the route climbs steadily to some prayer flags and arrives at **Jang** (3990m). The monastery is a short, stiff climb above here.



Jang village and gompa

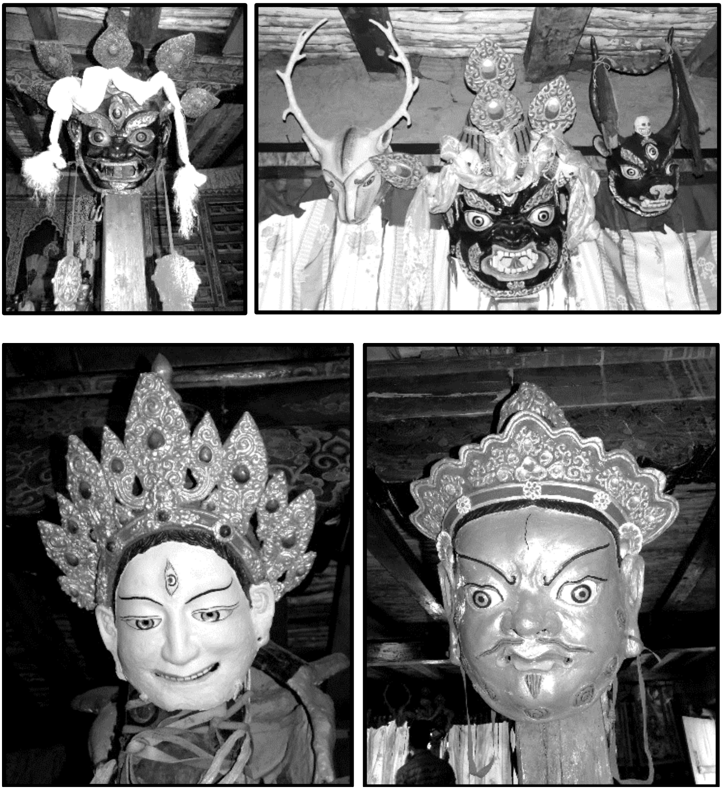
Jang Gompa

Jang monastery is another important Drigung gompa in the region, being around 200 years old. A lower chamber houses the prayer wheels with images of the Green Tara, a 1000-armed Chenresig, Guru Rinpoche and a yellow Tara.

The main monastery is amazing; three chambers are open to visitors, accompanied by a monk guide. Donations are expected, although no official amount is levied. On the second level is the Gonkhang, with fiery demons painted inside on the wall to the right of the door. On the left are more painted images; the red Palmo and Dawa Jigme Gonpo. The main icons are another Palmo, Mahakala, Dhanna Tali (we are not familiar with this icon) and the female Tsering. On the right walls are the 50 wise Arhats, beautifully painted near to Dorje Chang. Next is Demchok, a standing version of the deity who guards the gates of heaven, then Mahakala, beside a painted conch.

The next chamber is impressive, with the guardians of the four directions prominent before the door. Inside (going clockwise) on the door wall is Tsering again. On the left wall are Kusong – the image in embrace with his consort – and Guru Rinpoche. Other statues are Dorje Chang left, Drigung Jowo, Buddha and Guru Rinpoche. In front of these are pictures of the Dalai Lama and the Drigung incarnate, who lives in Dehra Dun. Adjacent to the door is a Mahakala and a fierce red-faced image on horseback, which looks like the Shugden.

The third chamber of the visit is most intriguing. It houses the festival masks used in the Cham dances. Here two stupas and a Sakyamuni Buddha watch over the masks. The gold images are amazing; they are said to be Namka Namse. Other black Mahakala masks look down with disdain. There are also two blue-faced masks with horns and skulls on top. Next are leopard-like masks with horns, then horned bulls with skulls and finally deer-like masks with horns. Thangkas and books round off the sights in this fascinating chamber.



Some of the mask images seen in Jang Monastery

Jang is the last permanently inhabited village before the Nyalu La pass. Across the pass is Lek Dinga, some 5 days away. If you need to buy rice, it may be on offer. If you need a horse for the next pass, it may be available for an astronomical fee. Don’t bank on finding ponies for the Nyalu La pass, and don’t expect to be able to drive up to the Tibetan border in the dodgy truck that sits nearby. Leaving Jang, the trail climbs quite stiffly before cutting around a bluff to flat plains, with animals grazing peacefully. The hot spring is a small concrete-walled affair with a pipe. Nearby is a crew shelter with no front door and the flattish **Jang Tatopani Camp** (4190m).

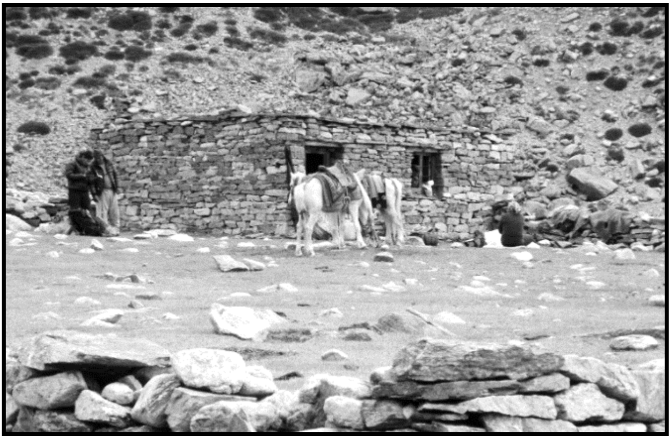
Jang – Traktse 3–3½hrs

Following the Limi Khola, now called the **Takchhe Chu**, the trail, when defined, skirts the wide-open, grassy plains. This is where the Drigung head lama visited and camped in 2008. Various mani walls and chortens are scattered about. By May, Drokpa nomadic herders have already set up their tents here.

The ‘road’ is rejoined near a **mani wall** and rock, with jagged, snowy peaks behind and flatter rolling hills ahead. **Tholing** (also Tuling) at 4146m is but a few forlorn shelters and simple houses; hardly any people were here in spring. The better trail climbs steadily around the west and north sides of the hill topped by the remains of Traktse village, finally reaching **Traktse Camp** (4233m). There are two shelters on site for the crew. During the evening watch out for the herds of wild ass (*kiang*); a hundred or more may be seen.

Trail between Jang and Traktse

Kiang, wild ass and Traktse meadow camp



The legend of Lama Palya

Traktse was once a proper Limi settlement, but fell into ruins; why was this? During the height of the Sakya-pa dominance across Western Tibet, a man named Lama Palya lived here; he was both wise and wealthy. When he died, his mother and sister were put upon for the family riches. They cried out for help to Lama Palya, who broke his path to Nirvana and became a ghost to vanquish the troublemakers. Now he is the protecting deity of the valley and is venerated as far away as Dinga and the Nyinba communities, who see him as one of their Dhami or shaman protectors. Strangely some Buddhist Lamas act as priests to the shamans of the lower country.

An **extra day or more** around Traktse will definitely aid acclimatisation for the Nyalu La pass ahead. Here are some options that we were not able to explore because of snow:

North of Limi Valley

The region north of the Limi Khola, the Traktse (Trakchhe or Tagtsi) Khola and Ning Valley approaches, is characterised by the open rolling grassy hills of the border region. At around 5000m, these moorlands are bitterly cold for most of the year. However, during the summer months (May to September), the grasslands offer rich pickings for herders. Running west–east and almost parallel to the Limi Khola across the high ridges is the Sakya Khola valley, a popular summer grazing area. This valley culminates in the border peaks called the Nalakankar Himal, with peaks rising to 6419m. The most northerly valley of the Gyau Khola is a wilder region that is enclosed by some snow peaks. The head of the valley to the west has spires adjacent to Gurla Mandhata, the high peak within Tibet overlooking Lake Manasarovar.

Kailash viewpoint 2–3 days

On the northern border are two passes – the **Lalung La** (4933m) and the **Limi Lapsang La** (also Labtse La) – that allow the local people to gaze across unhindered to the holy sites of Lake Manasarovar and **Mount Kailash**. Sometimes sky burials occur on these holy passes. The route is from **Traktse** to **Risarba** and on to **Phyalang Thana** (est 4800m). From here and back to the **Lalung La** pass (4933m) involves a climb of around 200m, but the distance is more of an issue. The trail (or lack of a well-defined one) to Changwathang goes east from around Phyalang Thana. This is a tough, wild route, with the altitude averaging 5500m. See the **Ning Valley** trek for more. In theory one might be able to hire the single truck from Jang or take ponies for the 2–3 days required to get to this point. However, the truck comes with a crazy price tag and so do the ponies of Jang.

Trail and road north from Traktse to Tibet

Ning Valley West

A rough trail climbs into the Ning Valley. It's a rather long approach to the trail that leads along the valley, with a lot of ascents up the moraines. This is the world of the summer herders. There are a couple of impressive glaciers draining the northern slopes of the peaks of the upper Chadog–Sechi Khola valley. At the end of the valley is a pass (5700m) which, when open, leads east to the Dojam Khola valley. The pass is a serious affair for well-equipped trekkers only. The Dojam valley down the other side is marked on maps as also being the Ning Khola valley (meaning 'heart' in Tibetan).

Ning Valley, Limi Himal (photo: Paulo Grobel)

Changwathang

Changwathang was climbed in 2000 by a small Japanese expedition of four climbers led by Tamotsu Ohnishi and accompanied by two Sherpas. They climbed the northwest ridge from a camp on the west. The mountain was not officially opened by the NMA until 2002. Another Japanese team led by Michihiro Honda later climbed it, this time by way of the south ridge. Paulo Grobel's expedition in 2011 followed the glacier along its northern flanks and then climbed an east-facing snow spur to the crest of the northwest ridge. The summit offers a fantastic view of the peaks of the Ning Valley West, Chandi Himal, Changla Himal, and Gurla Mandhata in Tibet.

Traktse – Talung Camp 5–6hrs

It's a steady climb to Talung Camp, with the main obstacle being the crossing of the icy-cold Ning Khola. The only solution is to take off your boots and wade, or hop on a horse if you're lucky enough to have one!

The trail from camp drops to cross the Takchhe Khola on either the suspension bridge or the old cantilever bridge. On top of the next ridge, a superb view unfolds, with the Ning Valley moraines to the southeast, Tshomo (Tshamdo) Lake to the south and rolling hills to the north. A pleasant descent follows to some swampy flats, but soon steep **sand dunes** prevent any swift ascent. This is a slog to the top, but it doesn't last long. It really is flat to the shores of **Tshomo Lake** (4270m). Taking the east side, the path climbs around the lake (also called Tsomgo and Tshamdo Lake) that is home to bright orange, black and white **Brahminy ducks** (also called ruddy shelducks). Once around the lake, the trail climbs to 5 or 6 roofless stone summer shelters at **Jade** (4286m).

Tshomo Lake

The wide track 'road' climbs steadily all the way, passing the narrow ravine and waterfall of the **Talung Khola** to the east. Just above here is the last decent grazing for the mules, so camp is made here at 3 stone shelters called **Talung Camp** (4425m). **Takyon Karpo,** a holy mountain, soars high above.

Takyon Karpo

The shamans and pre-Buddhist communities venerate Takyon Karpo as the home of Phola Takyon Karpo, who is depicted in images riding a white horse. In earlier times the deity was appeased with the hearts of yaks and sheep. These days dough balls are more commonly used. The mountain has particular importance as a holy place for the people of Limi and the Nyinba community in Todpa, who used to pass this way frequently on their way to trade with Tibet.

Takyon Karpo peak

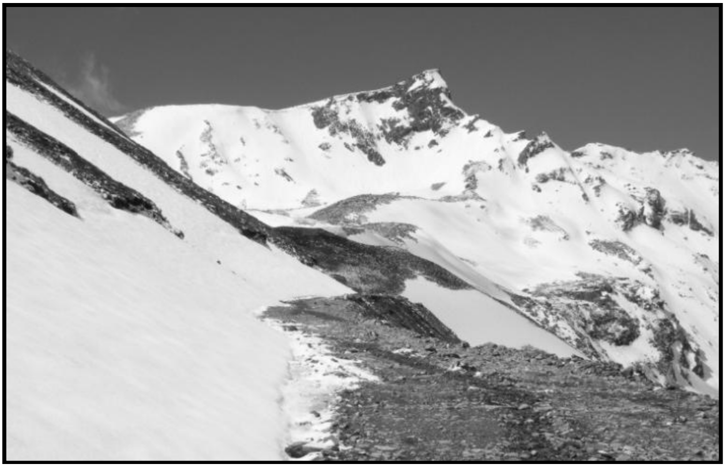
Talung Camp – Tshongsa 7–8½hrs

Warning: Remember, Altitude Kills!

Do not attempt to cross the pass in snow and bad weather. Just because a road is marked on the map, it does not mean it is usable, and the old path is messy. Being stranded without energy up here is potentially lethal. Ensure clothing is adequate (including all staff) and take plenty of water/emergency snacks. If a severe headache develops with disorientation – turn back and wait for another day.

The approach to the Nyalu La pass from Talung is innocuous enough, but beware the sting in the tail. The final approach is either along a long, winding dirt track or a steep rocky path that is severe and testing at this altitude. Unfortunately, Talung Camp is not high enough to give the best acclimatisation, so progress might be slower than anticipated. The rest of the day is a breeze, even though the drop to Tshongsa is significant.

From camp the trail climbs steadily for a long distance along the rocky ‘road’ into the high country. In clear weather the superb **Phupharka Himal** peaks ahead and to the west are fabulous. The route climbs steadily and the trail is obvious; following it makes the most sense, as the road is long and often covered by snow. The last steeper stage is not quite as bad as it looks and with head down, plodding, it’s done.



Approach to the Nyalu La pass

Flags decorate the **Nyalu La pass** (5001m); colourful heaps are seen to the left on the boulder peak. The descent is immediate and easy, especially along the road. It's easier, if longer, to follow the dirt road, as its not loose like much of the old trail. It takes about 1hr down to **Sheliman Lake** (4578m). From beyond the lake there is a fabulous view down the Salli Khola; The route zigzags down on the dirt road, which is a bit messy to look back at. Further down a super grassy path leads down to the idyllic **Tshongsa meadow camp** (4100m), set beside the calming stream and some big boulders.

Tshongsa – Simikot

The easier trail is down the Salli Khola valley, or head across the grain of the land via the Sechi La pass (4515m) and Lek Dinga to Simikot. The Salli Khola valley drops to Kermi and this option then turns east to Simikot along the main trail.

Tshongsa – Simikot via Chadog & Sechi La

Tshongsa – Chadog 5–6hrs

The dramatic **Salli Khola canyon** has sheer, towering rock faces above a flat valley. Lower down are the meadows, shelters and in season herders making churpi cheese from milk at **Singjungma** (3794m). The trail descends from Singjungma to the **Salli Khola bridge** (3707m) and junction. The route to Chadog is steadily up but it's OK. Eventually the trees dwindle, and the valley becomes wilder. The trail climbs around the valley, surrounded by rugged cliffs and soaring rocky peaks.

Salli–Tshongsa valley

The superb **Chadog Camp** (4223m) meadow is a vast flat grassy plain where herders stay in summer. High above this wild, almost alpine valley are five unnamed peaks of the Chhungsa Lek that soar to 6000m. The only peak named is Bailla, but it’s barely 5000m.

Camp at Chadog meadows

Chadog – Lek Dinga 5–6hrs

It’s another fabulous high and wild day with the crossing of the Sechi La. Lek Dinga is the first permanent habitation since Jang. From Chadog the climb is pleasantly easy, if a little continuously uphill.

Four major snow peaks soar behind the first jagged ridgeline. None have names and probably none have been climbed **–** at least not by any official classification.

Sechi La pass and views north (below)

Near the top of the pass, the path is definitely to be preferred over the road. It takes less than 2hrs to reach the summit of the **Sechi La** (4530m), also called the Langdog La. The views are sensational in all directions. To the southwest, **Saipal** might just be on view.

The descent is easy, especially along the long, winding road. Lower down the path is very steep; it's a wonder the mules don't crash down. From here the river seems close, but it's still a long zigzagging route that finally empties out into the **Thangur Khola** (3655m). A climb follows in pine and larch forest. The path climbs and contours around the hillside to an obvious **top notch** (3844m). The descent is fine along the road through woodlands to **Lek Dinga** (3648m).

Lek Dinga – Simikot 7–8½hrs

This is a rather long day and the big surprise is how deep the Yakba Khola valley is! From camp the trail soon joins the road and begins a long descent. Suffice to say the dirt road might be an engineering surprise, but it just goes on and on down. Eventually the fields of Yakba appear and then it's to the bridge over the **Yakba Khola** (2600m). Immediately after crossing the bridge, the trail ascends to the **viewpoint corner** (3044m) to reveal Simikot.

The trail/road heads to the large settlement of **Okhreni** (3025m). Finally **Simikot Lagna** pass (3270m) is attained. It remains only to pick a way down to **Simikot** (2985m) and the delights of the town – whatever they maybe and whatever cravings need to be satiated.

Taking the alternative route from Tshongsa to Simikot via Kermi takes 3 days.

Colourful friendly locals

The trail continues to descend from **Singjungma** (3794m) and along the Salli Khola to Kermi.

The holiday is well and truly about to begin as the trekking continues back to lovely **Dharapori**.

The mood is rather rudely shaken today with that massive 900m climb to **Simikot Lagna** and down to the delights of **Simikot**.

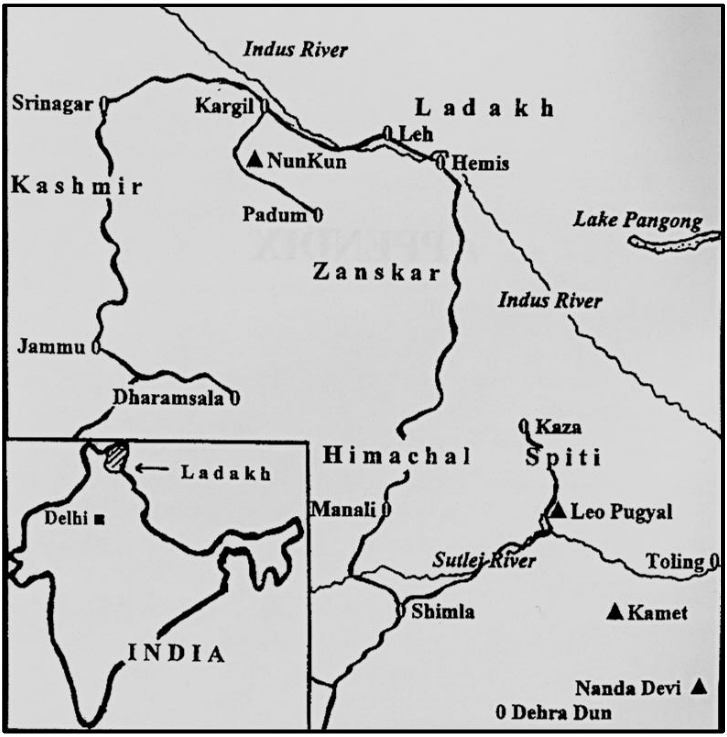
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ladakh and Spiti

No mention of western Tibet and Guge would be complete without some reference to upper Kinnaur, Spiti, Zanskar and Ladakh. Although ruled as an independent land for much of its history, Ladakh is nonetheless clearly under the Tibetan sphere of influence. A large number of its religious institutions have very strong links to western Tibet.

Many of its major monasteries, such as Alchi, Likir, Rizong, Chemrey and Spituk, are devoted to the Gelug-pa sect of Tsong Khapa. Lamayuru was once a Bon site and Traktok is an early Nyingma-pa monastery.

Map of Ladakh, Zanskar and Spiti


Indus River
Srinagar
Kargil
Ladakh
Leh
Hemis
NunKun
Kashmir
Padum
Lake Pangong
Zanskar
Indus River
Jammu
Dharamsala
Kaza
Himachal
Spiti
Ladakh
Delhi
Manali
Leo Pugyal
Sutlej River
Toling
Shimla
Kamet
INDIA
Nanda Devi
Dehra Dun

The Kingdom of Guge eventually fell from power under the reigns of King Sengge Namgyal and his son Deldan Namgyal in the 17th century. A brief outline of the history of Ladakh in relation to Guge and Tibet is outlined below.

Part of the ancient Guge Kingdom, Spiti is located south of Ladakh and Zanskar in modern Himalchal Pradesh, northeast of Shimla. The name Spiti means the middle land, the region now between India and Tibet. It is thought that the first inhabitants of the region were the Hindu Thakur, who might predate the Tibetan stock. The people in Spiti are now all Buddhists. From extensive fossil remains, it has been established that Tibet and Spiti were once under a sea called the Tethys Sea.

Ladakh extends from Muslim Kashmir in the west, Baltistan in the Pakistan Karakoram and Turkic Chinese Xinjiang in the north, and Himachal Pradesh to the south. Its eastern border along Pangong Lake lies adjacent to western Tibet and is relatively easily crossed from nature's standpoint, though not politically. Leh is the administrative capital and a fine base for exploring Ladakh's culture and monasteries.

History of Ladakh and Zanskar

Ladakh

The early history of Ladakh remains a mystery, for little is known of it before the 7th century. The great caravans of Central Asia passed this way, contributing to the rich culture. The history of Ladakh is also closely connected to events on the Tibetan plateau. The Mon and the Dards were the early inhabitants of Ladakh. The Dards basically worshipped the elements – fire, earth, sun, moon, water, animals etc – and in this their ideas would have been closer to the Bon of early Tibet who also worshipped such phenomena.

In the 2nd century, Ladakh came under control of the Kushana Empire from the west. Ladakh stood at a crossroads between the cultures of Tibet and Ghandara. Whether ancient Shangshung extended far into the geographical area of Ladakh is not clear, but a Bon monastery existed at Lamayuru long before Buddhism became dominant. The earliest Buddhists probably came to Ladakh in the 3rd century BC, but the religion did not become established for many more centuries.

Under Srongtsen Gampo, Tibet was unified and Buddhism developed. Ladakh and Spiti both fell under Tibetan jurisdiction at the time. During the 8th century, Tantric ideas crept into the Buddhist traditions and, with these more liberal ideas, a movement against the religion gained strength. Tantric values within Buddhism eventually heralded the decline of the religion across India, where Hinduism gained in strength. Tantric ideas, which developed in neighbouring Tibet, however also grew in strength in Ladakh.

The great revival of Buddhism eluded India, but on the high plateau of Tibet and Ladakh it prevailed. The most far-reaching Buddhist renaissance occurred in Western Tibet and the Guge kingdom, centred on Toling and Tsaparang. Ironically this revival was in part prompted after the assassination of King Langdarma, a strident Bon practitioner and anti-Buddhist ruler. It was his great grandson Nyima Gon who really established a firm rule over Ladakh and Western Tibet. Some scholars believe that the rock sculptures at Shey, near Leh, were initiated by Nyima Gon. In Guge-Tibet King Nyima Gon had three sons and each inherited his own territory. Ladakh fell to Lhachen Palgyi Gon, who established the Lhachen dynasty.

Under Yeshe O, Rinchen Zangpo is thought to have visited the fledgling monastic centre at Spituk around 1000AD. During the 12th to 15th centuries, the various kings of Ladakh loosely concentrated their power and constructed bridges, palaces and chortens. But they remained under the influence of Central Tibet, with a continued exchange of students and Buddhist teachers. It was under Tsong Khapa, the great reformer, that the Kadam-pa sect transformed into the Yellow Hat sect of the Gelug-pa. Many of the Ladakhi monasteries also transferred to this sect, among them Spituk, Thikse, Chemrey and Likir.

The lineage of the ruling Lachen clique ended with King Lodros Chog Idan, through family dissent. This allowed the Namgyal dynasty to take power. The first king Tashi Namgyal grabbed power from his elder brother but, being unable to produce an heir, rule reverted to the son of his brother, Lhawang. Tashi Namgyal, despite his fairly despotic rule, did bring the Drigung sect, part of the Kagyu-pa discipline from east of Lhasa, into favour.

Tsewang Namgyal was followed by Jamyang Namgyal. He faced a more serious threat from the north and west. The Balti clans had adopted Islam and threatened Ladakh, and he lost many of his greater lands in the conflict. King Sengge Namgyal (approx 1590-1620) became heir. It is he who was to be linked to the downfall of Guge, although it was under his son Deldan that the final arrow pierced the kingdom. His campaigns to the east allowed him to penetrate into Tibet almost as far as Namring close to Xigatse. It was under Deldan that the Portuguese Jesuit, Antonio de Andrade, travelled to Tsaparang in Guge, which may also have given rise to the final decline of the Guge kingdom.

When the Mongol hordes spread out from Central Asia and effectively took Central Tibet under their wing, the new Ladakhi king Delegs Namgyal found himself on the retreat. He turned to Kashmir for help and, under the great Moghul emperor Shah Jahan, it was agreed, on condition he became a Muslim. The war between Ladakh under King Delegs Namgyal and Tibet through the fifth Dalai Lama was concluded in 1665.

William Moorcroft visited Ladakh around the period 1820 to 1822, one of the first British subjects to explore the land. Tsepal came under threat from the south when the Kulu kings invaded much of southern Ladakh. The second son of Tsepal, Chogsprul, took three wives in 1834, but his rule was doomed by the rising power of the Sikhs, Ranjit Singh of Lahore, the Dogras of Jammu and the British East India Company.

Not content with his successes in Ladakh, the Dogra chieftain Zorawar Singh made a brief advance to the north against Muslim Baltistan. Immediately after this assault on the Baltis, Zorawar set his armies, including Ladakhis, towards Tibet. With six to seven thousand men, he crossed the high passes in winter, trashed the Hanle and Tashigang monasteries and advanced towards Mount Kailash. At Tirthapuri the Tibetans offered resistance and, soon afterwards, Zorawar was wounded. Rutok, Guge and Purang were back in the hands of Tibet and Zorawar's grave was built near Purang, where remains still exist today. A peace ensued after some years between Tibet and Ladakh, and Jigsmed, the last of the Namgyal dynasty, retired to his palace in Stok.

In 1842 an army under Wazir Ratra crushed the Tibetan and Ladakhi armies to gain power, and eventually drew Ladakh into the Indian field of influence. Ladakh and Spiti later came under Kashmiri rule. Under the British, Ladakh remained under Jammu, with monasteries retaining their land and status. In 1947 it formally became part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Significant monasteries of Ladakh

We mention below only the main monasteries connected with Rinchen Zangpo. For further reading, look for our guide to the monasteries of Ladakh: ***Ladakh: A Land of Mystical Monasteries*** by Siân Pritchard-Jones and Bob Gibbons.

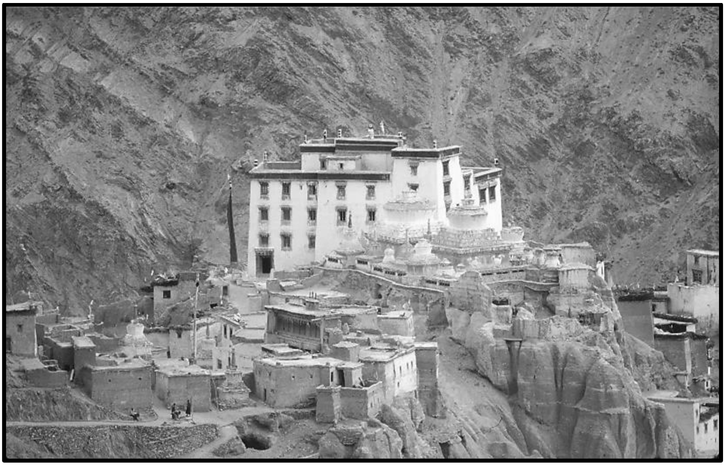
Alchi

Alchi is one of the oldest monasteries in the region, dating from the 11th century. It has the closest associations with Guge and Tibet, because of its historical links. Said to have been founded by Kalden Shesrab, it was built or dedicated under Rinchen Zangpo and his Kashmiri artists. Its paintings show the distinct Kashmiri/Indian style. Sited on flat terrain, it consists of a maze of courtyards and corridors. There are a number of chapels here, including the Manjushri Lhakhang, Lotsa (Lotsawa) Lhakhang, Sum Tsek Lhakhang, Kangyur Lhakhang and the Lhakhang Soma, as well as some significant chortens. Alchi used to have high walls known as cags-ri around the Chos complex, similar to the walls at Tabo in Spiti. Trifoliate wooden arches decorate the entrance to the Sum Tsek. Originally of the Kagyu-pa sect, it is now administered from Likir under the Gelug-pa.

Lamayuru

The monastery and village have one of the most spectacular settings of any in Ladakh, high above the Drogpo river. Hemmed in by strangely eroded spires and organ pipe features, the scene presents an alluring vision of a mediaeval lost world. It was once called the Yungdrung monastery, which means its origins lie with the Bon faith of early Tibet. This makes it one of the oldest monasteries in Ladakh. It also had the name Tharpa Ling, which means ‘place of freedom’, because miscreants could seek refuge in the monastery.

According to one legend, the area once lay under a lake full of Naga spirits. A learned teacher, the Arhat Nyimagung, is said to have dried up this lake and made the land fit for a shrine. Lamayuru is now one of two major Drigung Kagyu-pa gompas in Ladakh. The Drigung was founded by Skyoba Jigjen Gonpo in 1179, northeast of Lhasa at Drigung Til in the Kyichu river valley. However they did not formally gain the monastery from the Kadam-pa until the 16th century.

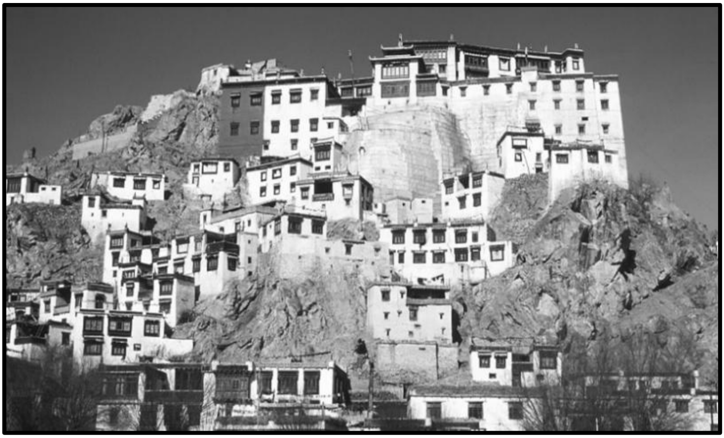


Lamayuru monastery

The oldest part of the monastery dates back to the 11th century, to the time of Rinchen Zangpo. It is called the Sengge Lhakhang and is all that remains of possibly five lhakhangs from that time. The main image, as was common in the 11th century, is that of Vairocana, the fifth Dhyani Buddha, set on a Garuda figure.

Spituk

Spituk is one of the oldest monasteries in Ladakh, the site being consecrated in the 11th century during the time of Rinchen Zangpo and Yeshe O. It was given its name then as a 'model community', which is what Spituk translates as. Initially a Kadam-pa monastery, it was officially founded by King Gas Ra Bum. Much later in the 15th century, it became a seat of learning for the dominant Gelug-pa. Two emissaries of Tsong Khapa came to Ladakh to grant its full status.



Spituk monastery

A curious story relates how one of the statues was created from the nose blood of Tsong Khapa – the Tsa Phags Med image. It is said to have been hidden in a 3m Buddha in the Dukhang at one time.

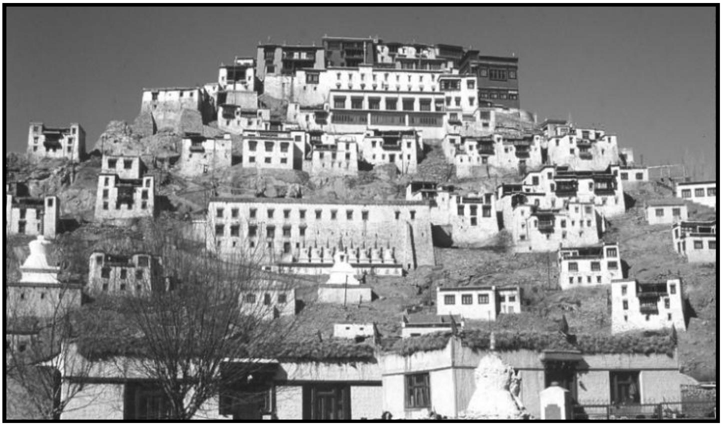
Close links with Tibet in the 15th century made the monastery an important beacon on the western Tibetan plateau. A statue of Jo in the Jokhang (Chokhang) temple was brought from Tibet at that time.

Thikse

Thikse is one of the most famous of all Ladakh's monasteries. Its gleaming white buildings climb up the steep-sided hill of its location to a summit of superb red, yellow and white chapels. Thikse was founded in the mid-15th century by two emissaries of Tsong Khapa: the sage, Sherab Zangpo, and his disciple, Spon Palden Sherab. These two sages are often seen sitting beside Tsong Khapa in monasteries.

It is believed that the great translator Rinchen Zangpo built a chapel here in the 11th century, a building that can no longer be seen. What remains today are a number of chapels: the old Dukhang, the Gonkhang, and the latest and much-admired addition, the red Chamba Lhakhang of Maitreya on the east end. Other chapels include the Kudung Lhakhang and the Dolma Lhakhang, now designated as the Tara Temple.

The most imposing sight at Thikse is the 12m (40ft) high golden statue of Maitreya, built in 1979. Maitreya is in a sitting position, wearing a golden crown. Behind and on the sides are images of Tsong Khapa and Sakyamuni.



Thikse Monastery

In the Kudung Lhakhang are two large silver and gold stupas. The sixth reincarnate, Nawang Namgyal, and the seventh, Chamba Tsogryist, are on display here, as well as the current ninth incumbent head lama. A complex five-headed yab-yum with the consort having two heads – Chakrasambhava or Demchok – and the other, also a yab-yum, is Tsangdu (Guhyasamaja). Both are now on view in the Dukhang.

Often closed, on the roof are four further chapels. The Lhamo Lhakhang is on the north side, presumably housing a statue of Palden Lhamo, the fierce female deity. Next to it is a closed chamber. Another room is the Chamsing Lhakhang, which contains, unsurprisingly, images of Chamsing. The other chamber is the old library hosting the holy books.

Perhaps the most astonishing chapel is the gonkhang, where the ferocious mind-curdling protectors are gathered in a dark and solemn temple, disturbed only by a lone monk beating a drum in near total blackness, an eerie song to the dead. Hidden in this ghostly chamber is Kitapala, a strange, veiled idol with spiky crown and skulls, sitting on an even stranger vehicle – a beast defying description. A three-headed Yamantaka is the tallest central deity. A four-armed Mahakala sits to the right. On the left and veiled is Kala Repa, the black-clad one.

Hemis

Hemis is perhaps the most famous monastery in Ladakh. It is said to house five hundred monks, and there are at least five chambers worth a visit. Many years ago Nicholas Notovitch reported that there were documents proving that Jesus Christ had passed this way two thousand years ago, but these documents apparently no longer exist. The monastery was built in the 1630s by Kushokq Shambhu Nath, the first Stagsang Raspa (Taksang Respa), and the Raj Guru of Gyalpo Singay Namgyal. After 1730, Gyalsang Rinpoche, the third incarnate Kushokq Stagsang Raspa, extended the gompa, building more shrines, chapels and stupas, with fine scriptures and murals. The supreme head of the monastery, and the Drukpa Kagyupa school of Mahayana, is His Holiness Gyalwang Dugchen. The Drukpa school was established in the 13th century. A great sage meditated in a cave about 2km above the gompa; this cave, Gotsampo, is now a pilgrimage site, and a visit makes a pleasant walk in summer.

Hemis monastery

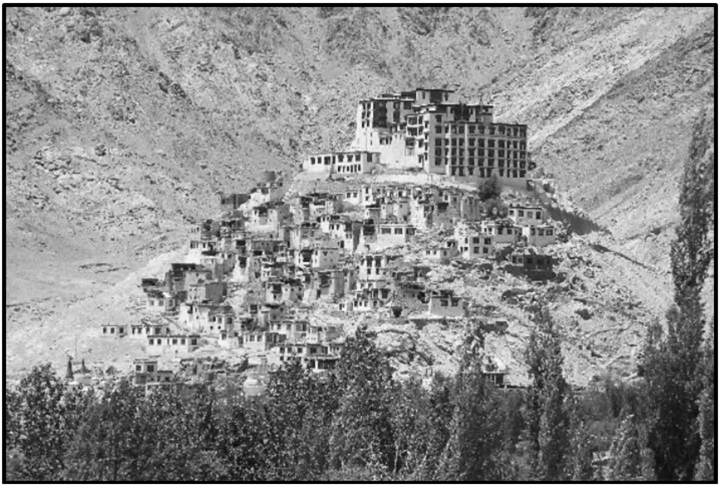
It is particularly noted for its colourful festival during June or July (the 10th and 11th day of the 5th Tibetan month), when around fifty thousand visitors descend on Leh, stretching its limited resources. Some of the Cham dances include the banishing of Langdarma, the Bon King. Every twelve years a large thangka depicting Guru Rinpoche is unrolled and draped down the walls of the Dukhang.

From the courtyard where the dances take place, one can see a line of prayer wheels below the main plinth. The two main chapels here, with large entry doorways, are the Dukhang on the left and the Tsokhang on the right.

Chemrey

The monastery presents a stunning sight. Sitting at the very summit of a steep-sided mountain, it dominates the surrounding fields and valley. Houses and buildings flow down the hill from here to a base cluttered by new and old chortens.

Chemrey is the most important branch of Hemis monastery. Begun under Sengge Namgyal and his chief lama Stagsang (Taksang) Raspa, it was probably enlarged as a dedication to Sengge Namgyal after his death. Dates for this are suggested as around 1644–46. It is administered from Hemis and is devoted to the Kagyupa sect.



Chemrey Monastery

The principle lhakhangs here are the Tsogchen, Lama Lhakhang and Guru Lhakhang, as well as smaller book and butter lamp chambers. An old kitchen may be opened for visitors.

The Guru Lhakhang is a chamber with a prolific number of deities. It is primarily a chapel dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, and many of the images represent differing aspects of the Tantric magician. Set in glass cases on the left are Sakyamuni, Dorje Thulo on a tiger, and Guru Jigme; above are Kanpo and Guru Tapo. To the right, also behind glass, are Gyalpo Tashang Desang, Sokya Sengge, Sengge Dorje and Nyima Utse in one, and Guru Rinpoche, Sengge Datong, Padma Gyalpo and Sipe Datok. The latter might have links to Bon. The great Guru sits overlooking all these accompanying disciples.

On the walls of the Guru Lhakhang, one may spot Heruka, a wrathful Dhyani Buddha Akshobhya, Mahakala, Amitabha, Tara, Kubera the god of wealth, Kalachakra, Yamantaka and ‘Ligi Haton’, Chakma on a horse and two amazing skeletons. The sixteen arhats are here to give comfort. In the Lama Lhakhang, look out for Guru Rinpoche flanked by Soche Donge, Lama Taksang Raspa, the founder of the monastery, Tu Bang, Tapo Rinpoche and Tapopa.

The Tsogchen was unfortunately closed at the time of our visit. This three-storeyed chapel faces east; there are some prayer wheels here and a courtyard. On the south side is a large book room and next to it a butter lamp chapel.

The main festival here usually falls in November; Cham dances are performed. A new courtyard has been added to Chemrey, ostensibly to improve the courtyard for festivities. The façade wall now hosts five storeys of windows.

Changspa chorten, Leh, with Shey Monastery (above)

Alchi hosts famous paintings

Rizong monastery (above) **Guru Rinpoche in Traktok Gompa**

Zanskar

Very closely linked to Ladakh for most of its history, Zanskar was once an independent fiefdom. Buddhism has probably been established in the region since the time of Emperor Kanishka (78–101AD). Sani monastery near Padum has a chorten said to date from that time, and there is evidence that a monastery known as Kanika existed close by. Zanskar then belonged to the empire ruled from Kashmir. Zanskar found itself under the power of the Tibetans from Ngari during the time of Srongtsen Gampo. The '*Chronicles of Zanskar'* texts mention a terrible battle between the Kashmiris and Tibetans at Tanktse, east of Leh across a pass from Traktok Monastery and close to Pangong Lake.

Nyima Gon gave Zanskar and Spiti to one of his sons, Detsu Gon. One of Detsu Gon's sons, Khor De, then inherited the mantle. But with the death of Tashi Gon, another of Nyima Gon's sons, who ruled Guge Purang, Khor De moved from Padum to Toling. Khor De became known as Lachen Yeshe O. The younger brother of Yeshe O ruled Zanskar, but his name appears unknown. Under Sron-ne Guge, Zanskar and Spiti were joined. Little recorded history is to be found until the 14th century.

Lachen Shakyathub from Spiti appears to have taken power in Padum. He married a princess from Gilgit to the north, but she was abducted by the Balti, Yabsgod, causing him great sorrow. The son of Yabsgod was Sengge De, and his three sons were given control over three principalities; Padum, Zangla – close to Padum, and Kishtwar in the south. Kishtwar later fell under the Muslim powers of Kashmir.

Padum and Zangla remained in the Buddhist sphere, but real power lay in Leh with the Namgyal kings of Ladakh. From around 1470 to 1530, control of Zanskar was in the hands of Lozang Detsan Gyelpo, but Muslim forces under Mirzi Haidar constantly threatened the region. The Phuktal monastery acted as a mediator and paid tributes to secure some sort of peace in the following years. Once King Sengge Namgyal controlled Ladakh, Zanskar's tiny principalities lost independence.

Zangla was primarily ruled by monk kings, who also controlled the Karsha monastery. A curious alliance developed between the kings of Zangla and the Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal, the head lama of Bhutan in the mid-17th century. This link brought benefits to Ladakh, but it upset the Tibetans, leading to the war concluded by the treaty of 1665.

After the Dogra wars in 1842, all of Zanskar and Ladakh was ceded to Jammu and Kashmir State.

Eastern Ladakh

Closest to the Tantric lands of Kailash, the eastern region of Ladakh borders Tibet and holds some amazing landscapes, including the fabulous Pangong Lake, recently opened to tourism. Using Leh as a base, new routes head east to Tangtse via the Khardung La, Shyok Valley and back over the Chang La pass. Pangong Lake borders India and China and is a sensitive region with occasional flare-ups, but for travellers it's not to be missed. The monasteries remain true to their ancient heritage, with amazing iconography and strong links to the Tantric themes that came into being long before modern borders divided the western plateau of Tibet.

Shyok, Nubra Valleys and Pangong Lake

Currently one of the most exciting excursions from Leh, particularly popular with Indian domestic tourists and backpackers, is the three-day Nubra and Pangong Lake jeep trip. However, this three-day trip is very rushed, with a lot of driving, overnighting in Hunder and Pangong Lake. A better plan is to take 5 or even 6 days to include the drive along the Shyok valley west to Turtuk and more of the actual Nubra valley north of Sumur, including the colourful hot springs at Panamik and the exquisite artwork at Ensa Monastery.

Crossing the Khardung La pass

The road departs from near the Leh Polo ground and almost immediately starts a long twisting climb up arid mountainsides. There is a checkpost at South Pullu, about 34km before the pass, where the drivers normally do the paperwork. This is about an hour from Leh. The now dirt road climbs in long relatively easy loops with a glacier appearing to the west. The top ridges are more jagged and the pass is reached about 1hr 30mins from Leh.

The pass may well be the highest motorable road in the world, but during summer this place is also the ‘highest traffic jam’ in the world! It was opened to road traffic in 1976.

There are a couple of cafés and a lot of domestic tourists taking selfies in front of the sign board at the summit. Once over the top, the road sweeps down the less steep side of the range. Yaks are a common sight up here, as the still dirt road descends to North Pullu and another checkpost. It's about 30mins to here from the top. The road improves and there are a few dhabas (local restaurants) by a river if you are desperate for nourishment en route.

The village of Khardung is about 17km down in a greener area. Khardung boasts the Wangchok Cho Guest House, Silok Guest House and the Happy Angno Café, but standards are not top notch.

There are views of Argon Kangri peak and, after a deep canyon, the road offers some great panoramic views east up the Shyok from the one lay-by overlooking the valley. Actually the best views are from a corner 200m before the lay-by with a cairn on the ridge to the right. Almost down into the Shyok valley is the settlement of Khalsar.

The road descends in a series of loops, passing below sheer sandstone cliffs and the Siachen Stallions army base. Once on the valley floor, the road soon comes to a junction.

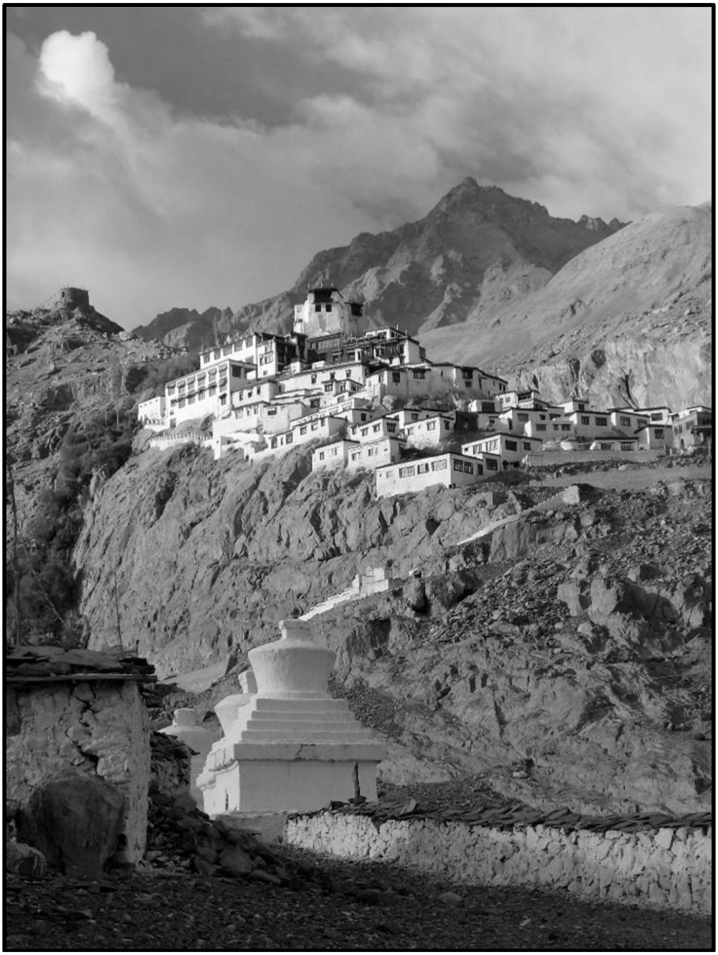
Khardung La pass glacier

The left road goes to Diskit and the right branch to Sumur and the Nubra valley – which eventually leads to the disputed area of the Siachen Glacier. Surprisingly, after a short sandy area the route climbs up on a series of hairpin bends to a more contouring stretch high above the valley. Around the rugged barren hillsides is the astonishing monastic complex of Diskit.

It is a 5–6hrs drive from Leh to Diskit. There are three areas in Diskit: the small commercial/inhabited area, the spectacularly located monastery and the new Buddha statue complex.

Diskit

Diskit is about 150km or so from Leh and is linked to Thikse monastery. Enquire about a travel permit a couple of days in advance at a local travel agency in Leh. Private vehicle is the easiest way to go, but there are buses in summer. Take warm clothing for the Khardung La crossing.



Diskit monastery is one of the most impressive in the Nubra region of Ladakh, for its location, art and history

Diskit Monastery

The famed Diskit monastery was established in the early 15th century, founded by Shenrap Zangpo. The monastery sits on a very steep, rugged crag overlooking the village. The complex has a series of chambers open to visitors. The large Chokhang is normally the easiest chamber to see, as it is much used by the considerable number of monks. Inside there's a long, beautiful hall with wooden floors and posts draped with colourful flags. The Sakyamuni Buddha sits behind glass with Guru Rinpoche to the right and a Green Tara to the left.

The Gonkhang when open has some amazing deities. The Dukhang is one of the most atmospheric rooms, with some unrestored old paintings. The 1000-armed, 11-headed Avalokiteshvara (Chenresig) is impressive. The skylight hosts a picture of the Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Shigatse, Tibet and home of the Panchen Lama. Other images include Amitabha and the Green Tara.

Close to the monastery hill in Diskit are the upmarket Hotel Olathang, and the Sunrise Guest House accessed under a mani wall and chortens. Karakoram Guest House is nearby. Other enterprising guesthouses are located a few minutes’ drive away from the centre.

Nubra Valley

The road from Diskit descends to the wide sandy floor of the Shyok and reaches a major junction. From here it crosses the Shyok and heads northwest up the Nubra valley to the oasis of Sumur. The famed Samstenling Monastery is located up to the northeast (right) off the main road high up the alluvial fan, which is luxuriant with greenery in summer. Other monasteries of the Nubra are Tegar, Ensa near Panamik and the ruins of Sengge Namgyal’s citadel across the river.

Diskit – Tangtse 5–6hrs

The route heads east from Diskit to Khalsar and then along the Shyok valley. After a stony river crossing and a rather scary cliff zone, it continues southeast to Agyam. Set in a lush side valley, the settlement boasts a few cafés. The road for Pangong loops around, crosses, re-crosses and generally follows the Shyok Valley. Some sections of the road are quite rough, but the snowy peaks are a distraction. Into a narrow defile, the road clings to the cliffs; the scenery is wild and rugged.

More narrow canyons follow and after crossing back over the Shyok River, the road eventually climbs up to the village of Shyok. There are with views of the big bend in the river where it turns north to the Rimo peaks and glacier. Shyok has a few cafés and a small gompa.

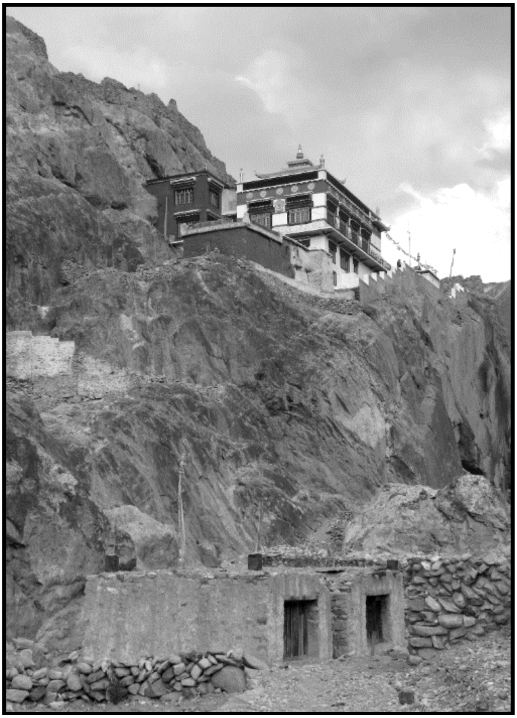
From Shyok the route leaves the Shyok valley and climbs into a dramatic narrow side canyon clinging to a seemingly impossible cliff. A large new stupa sits on a roundabout in the settlement of Durbuk, with cafés and a couple of simple guesthouses. Between Durbuk and Tangtse the military have taken most of the ground. Do not take photos around here and note that intruders will be shot!

Tangtse

The small settlement at Tangtse is 81km from Karu and about 126km from Leh.

Tangtse Monastery

The main attraction is the dramatically located monastery in the gorge. Those with time and energy can walk through the settlement, out along the river and across fields to find a steep access path up to the rebuilt lower monastery. Tangtse monastery belongs to the Drigung-Kagyupa sect and the lower section clings to the cliffs. This is where the major lhakhangs are found, including the Dukhang. The original gompa was built in the reign of Sengge Namgyal (1616–1642). The main icon of the monastery is Jigten Sumgon (locally called Skyoba Jigstan Gonpo), founder of the Drigung sect in 1179, near Lhasa. The Drigung sect developed from the Kagyupa sect; it has lost its once far-reaching importance in Tibet and is stronger in Ladakh today. Local labour was used over eight years to rebuild the monastery. The Gonkhang is a smaller chamber, with images of the black Gonbo, a red Chukon on a horse and an icon called Embje, all set against the rock face. Various horns and drums are seen here, together with a picture of the Dalai Lama. On the west side,a third lhakhang is devoted to Maitreya. It has images of Chamba (Maitreya), Tongba and a white Chenresig. Another ancient chamber, part of the unchanged original structure, has no light but hosts some very old paintings.



Tangtse has some traditional houses, a dusty main street and the glorious Hotel Pangong Resort, with a large garden and quite good facilities.

In the centre, Changla Guest House is an alternative.

Tangtse to Pangong 1–1½hrs

The road initially drops down a small canyon and emerges into a more fertile greener valley with marmots, yaks, cattle and sheep munching on the fresh grass. Later the grass gives way to drifting sands. About an hour from Tangtse is the settlement of Lukkung, where the lake is first glimpsed. Most visitors head along the shoreline soon after this on a rough dirt track. There are sandy spits and great reflections across the lake, especially in the mornings before the wind stirs up the water. Spangmik hosts a vast caravan in summer for domestic travellers.

Pangong Lake

At a dizzying altitude of 4270m, the long, narrow and strikingly coloured Pangong Lake, which straddles the border between India and China, is 113km from Karu (160km from Leh). The lake is approximately 130km long and 5–6km wide. Most of it lies in Tibet (China), so it is not possible to do a circuit of the lake. Unfortunately, the Tibetan border is not open here and prospective visitors to the fabled lands of Guge will have to dream.

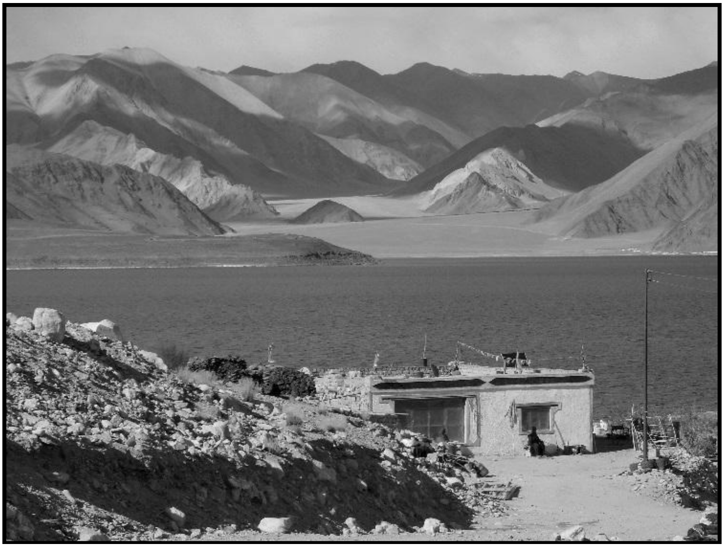
Pangong Lake

Spangmik has the most varied accommodation, including a couple of permanent hotels – the Hotel Serbum, costs Rs3500 half board for an excellent room and food. Tents vary from Rs2200 and more. Don’t expect gourmet food, since all food and drinking water has to be carried into the area. A couple of small monasteries are located above Spangmik. One, Shyabumchen belongs to the Drigung sect and houses an image of Skyoba Jigstan Gonpo plus a 1000-armed Chenresig.

Excursion to Maan village

A rough dirt road leads along the lake southeast to Maan (Man) village. There are a couple of tourist camps and a couple of homestays here, so overnight stays are possible. The village of Maan sits above the lake with a small monastery (called Goan Sang Aak Chosling), some fields and a few traditional Tibetan-style houses.

Ruddy Shelduck (Brahminy Duck) on Pangong Lake



Pangong Lake and Maan village

The ‘border’ is about another 40km along the lake. Skirmishes between India and China have taken place close to this village and in the Lake Pangong region.

Peak above Pangong Lake

Crossing the Chang La pass 4–5hrs

Leaving Spangmik the road climbs from the camps, hugging the cliffs around to Lukung and back the same way to Tangtse and Durbuk. Heading southwest, the road begins a long but steady climb towards the Chang La pass the second highest road pass in the world. The lower peaks of the Karakoram appear to the northeast. Higher up is the often-frozen Tso Tak lake and some cafés popular with the domestic crowd. Another 15–20mins up on the rough road is the chilly Chang La pass (5360m) – the second highest 'traffic jam' in the world! It takes 2½hrs from Pangong Lake to the pass.

Chang La pass

The descent is steeper, but the road snakes down in a series of long loops. After the buildings at Zingrol, the road is again sealed passing Shakti, a village off to the right with a small gompa clinging to the cliffs. The new road descends, bypassing Chemrey Gompa, to Karu, with cafés and a couple of guesthouses. Then it's only a short drive on to Thikse, Shey and Leh.

Tso Moriri Lake

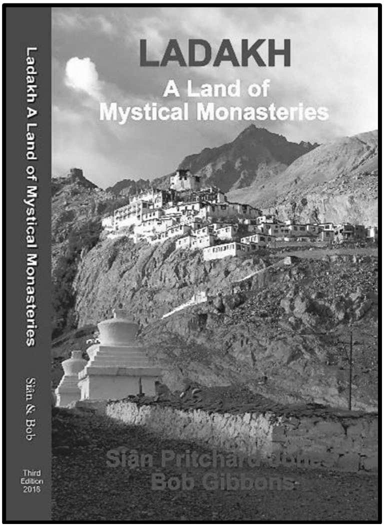
The lake lies far to the east and close to the Tibetan border, set within barren, rolling landscapes. There is a substantial monastery at Korzok in the Rupshu region, where nomadic Changpa herders are found in summer. En route is the Puga valley that has salt extraction. Tibetan refugees live here. Despite the harsh climate, marmots, hares and tail-less rabbits live here. Brahminy ducks, bar-headed geese, crested grebes and gulls head for the lake in summer.

Tsokar Lake

This much smaller lake is usually visited on a trip to Tso Moriri and is known as the white lake. There is a modest guesthouse in the nearby village of Tikje. The roads are rough in places.

Hanle Monastery

About as remote as it gets in Ladakh, Hanle Monastery is almost out of Ladakh, being well to the southeast of Zanskar closer to Spiti. It is located in the region known as the Chang Tang. Hanle is an imposing fortress-like monastery, set high overlooking the surrounding barren landscapes. It can only be visited by private transport and foreigners should check if any different permit is required.



Diskit monastery

For much more on the major monasteries and sights across Ladakh see our guidebook:

Ladakh: A Land of Mystical Monasteries

Spiti and Kinnaur

The name Spiti means the middle land, the region now between India and Tibet. It is thought that the first inhabitants of the region were the Hindu Thakur, who predated the Tibetan stock. From a copper plate dated to 630AD we know that kings of the Sen dynasty ruled the region. This was before the 7th century, when Srongtsen Gampo populated the region with Tibetan peoples. The people in Spiti and upper Kinnaur above Rekong Peo are now all Buddhists. With as many as a dozen former Nyingma-pa monasteries known to exist in upper Kinnaur and Spiti, there is a strong possibility that Padma Sambhava spent time in the region. A blending of Brahman deities and Buddhist icons seems to have been common in Kinnaur.

History of Spiti

Spiti, upper Kinnaur and adjacent Lahaul were part of Guge, but little else is known about their history before the 11th century. In part this must have been due to their isolated locations tucked up behind the main Himalayan peaks against the Tibetan border area. Lhasa exerted influence over all the lands of the Tantric mountain – Guge, Purang, Rutok, Spiti, Lahaul and Ladakh – for much of the period of the Guge kingdom. Upper Kinnaur has always been a rich melting pot of ideas, peoples and cultures with evidence of Bon, Brahmanic cults and later Buddhism. With more open-minded Bon elements remaining here, Rinchen Zangpo helped to create many Buddhist centres in Upper Kinnaur (and Lahaul) during the 11th century.

Spiti suffered various invading forces; the Tibetans attacked in the mid-11th century, and the Mongolians, under Kublai Khan, came by in 1262. King Sengge Namgyal incorporated Spiti into his domain in the late 16th century after the power of Guge waned. Spiti was generally under the nominal control of the Ladakhi kings after this period. Sengge Namgyal appointed a stepbrother, Stanzin Namgyal, in control of Spiti. His territory extended far down the Sutlej in Kinnaur to Wangtu, some 35km west of modern-day Rekong Peo. Lahaul, northwest of Spiti, paid tributes to Tibet until well into the 17th century.

Spiti was dragged into the conflict between Ladakh and Tibet in the 1660s. Mongolian troops under the fifth Dalai Lama’s patronage plundered the region, targeting Sakya-pa monasteries at Tangyud and Lha Lung. The monasteries at Nako, Poo and Chango also suffered. The war ended with the peace treaty signed at Tingmogang in 1665. The region of Kinnaur below Kalpa was henceforth under the Bushahr rulers.

Dhankar became the nominal capital of Spiti and its local rulers were called the Nonos. These Nonos descended from Stanzin Namgyal and were adherents to the Sakya-pa sect.

Gaga Khanrab was the first noted Nono, another was Gaga Dorje. Around 1765, forces from neighbouring Kinnaur briefly held lands south of Dhankar. In 1821 and 1822 Spiti suffered attacks from the Kulu region, probably because of threats to Kulu from the Sikhs. The famous Ki monastery was looted. Then in 1837 the Sikhs, under Ranjit Singh of Lahore, invaded and Tabo monastery was damaged.

Later the Dogras advanced into Spiti, causing further destruction at Ki and also in the Pin valley. After 1842 the British did not interfere with the activities in Spiti except over the wool trade from the Changtang plains. After Indian independence Spiti remained part of India. However, until 1959 Spiti continued to be culturally linked to Guge and Tibet. When Chinese troops entered Tibet, those links were cut.

Today Kaza, the local administrative centre of Spiti, is linked to modern Himalchal Pradesh, whose capital is at Shimla, by a 450km road, the Hindustan Tibet highway along the River Sutlej. Spiti is in India, but its roots are firmly linked to Guge, Tibet and Buddhism.

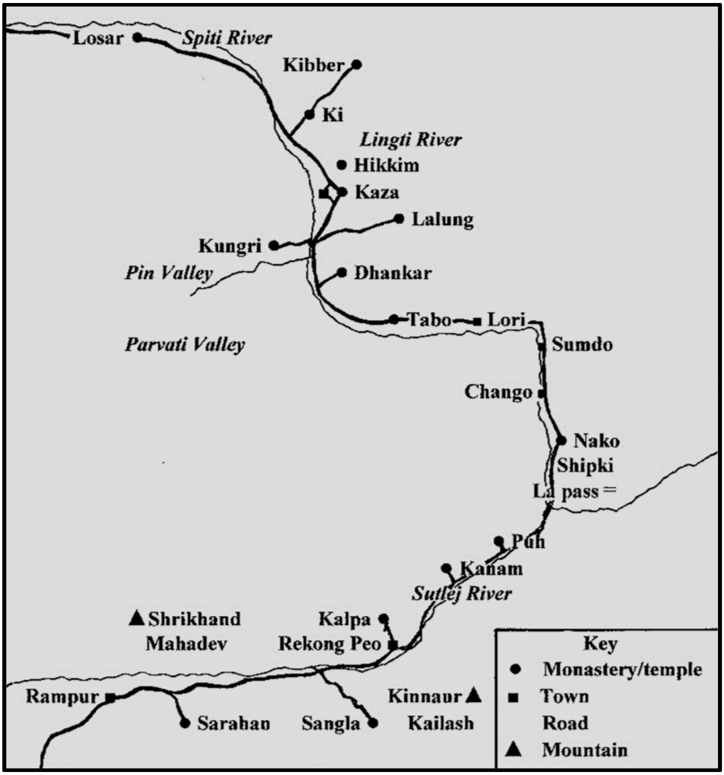
> One must know how to secure the confidence of the people, how to give them the impression that there is a spiritual affinity between the visitor and themselves; one must abandon at the frontiers of their land that European arrogance of which it is so difficult to rid oneself. I presented myself in the guise of a disciple, even if the conversation on abstruse themes of theology and metaphysics – when I found monks who were capable of understanding me – showed that I was no novice; I bowed before statues, I recited formulas of prayers in the austere silence of sacristies, I devoutly kindled votive lamps on altars, greatly to my advantage, and I raised above my head with the utmost respect every book or statue which was offered to me.
> **Secrets of Tibet:** ***Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi***

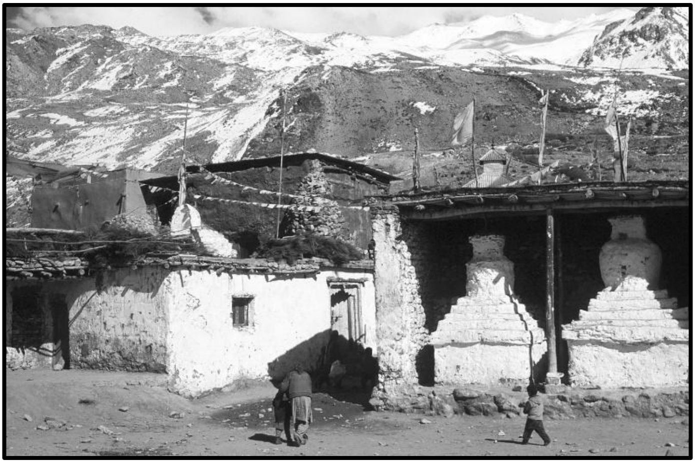
Monasteries of Spiti and Upper Kinnaur

Today the main attractions of Spiti and upper Kinnaur are their wildly located monasteries. Shut off from the rest of India and cut off by political boundaries from its ancient past, Spiti remains a mysterious fiefdom. The upper reaches of the Sutlej in Indian Kinnaur are also very rarely visited, with long access drives across wild countryside.

The places of interest along the Sutlej, heading towards Kaza from Shimla, are described below. (A route description appears in the general information section.)

Map of Monasteries in Spiti


Losar
Spiti River
Kibber
Ki
Lingti River
Hikkim
Kaza
Lalung
Kungri
Pin Valley
Dhankar
Tabo
Lori
Parvati Valley
Sumdo
Chango
Nako
Shipki
La pass
Puh
Kanam
Sutlej River
Shrikhand
Mahadev
Kalpa
Rekong Peo
Rampur
Sarahan
Sangla
Kinnaur
Kailash
Key
Monastery/temple
Town
Road
Mountain



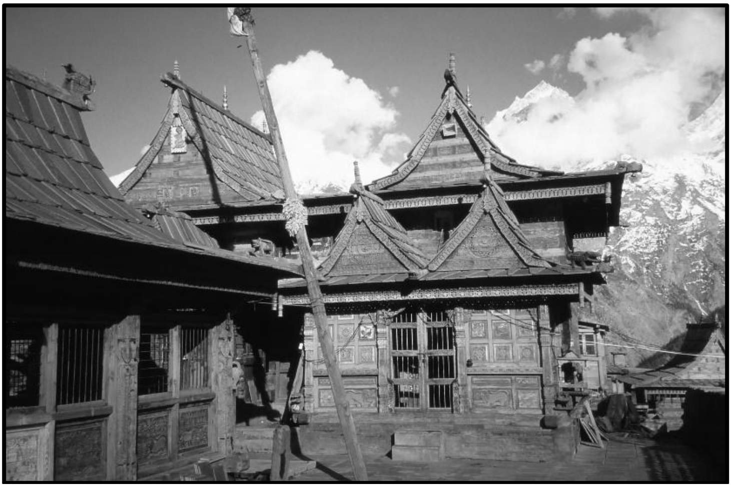
Nako monastery

Sarahan

Located on a shelf high above the south side of the Sutlej valley is the famous temple of Bhimakali at Sarahan. This place was probably just beyond the most westerly extent of the original Guge lands. The wood and stone-constructed temple of Kali here has suggestions of Buddhist designs, but is purely Hindu now. The two three-storied main shrines are housed in a large open quadrangle, with various accommodation and service buildings enclosing the courtyard. Today this place is revered for its two golden images of Kali as Bhimakali here. Formerly human sacrifices took place here and there are suggestions that Bon was once practiced in this area. One token image of the Gautama earthly Buddha is found here.

Kalpa

A few kilometres above modern Rekong Peo town is the winter home of Shiva in the village of Kalpa. It was formerly known as Chini. The main complex here has two main courtyards. The first houses an open pavilion, where Buddhist musical instruments are housed. The large pagodas reminiscent of pointed-roofed, Thai-style temples are dedicated to Shiva. In the back yard are two temples in gaily-painted colours, devoted to Vishnu. The amazingly intricate roof decorations are stunning, with delicate wooden shingles and slates.



Kalpa shrines

Tucci, on arriving here, said of the Hindu temples:

> "Religion is no longer as serene as in Lamaism, the deity is no longer regarded as a comfort and a guide, but as a force which transcends evil and good, implacable and deadly."

Also in Kalpa is an impressively decorated Buddhist monastery. On one wall the life of the earthly Buddha is depicted in 44 small paintings, including one of Siddhartha riding in a golden chariot before setting forth on his quest for life's great message.

Kailash Kinnaur peak, also a sacred summit

Kanum

Set high above the valley floor of the Sutlej above the village of Siello is Kanum. Here we are firmly into the regions of the former Guge kingdom. Although there are suggestions that Kanum monastery was begun under Rinchen Zangpo, there is no clear evidence of this today. It is suggested that Kanum was considered a place of literary wealth, with ancient texts of the Kangyur and Tengyur being located here. Tucci also suggests a school of art and, in particular, woodwork artistry existed at Kanum. The current structures are not of great antiquity, but it might originally have dated to the 13th century and been the work of a pious Kashmiri. The monastery was sacked by the Gurkhas during their incursions sometime before 1814. The famous Hungarian Tibetologist, Csoma de Koros, studied here.

Puh (Poo)

Puh has become a major settlement along the Hindustan highway with a large military presence. Even in former times it was a major stopping point along the Sutlej for trading caravans. That Poo was a Buddhist centre at the time of Yeshe O is little doubted, because of an inscription found by Francke. The name of the village of Khor linked to Poo suggests links to Yeshe O, because his name was Khor De. The original shrine appears to have been lost over the centuries, but some objects are thought to pre-date the current buildings. The main chapel is dedicated to the great Lotsawa, Rinchen Zangpo.

Khab, Namgia and Shipki La

The village of Namgia lies off the main highway a few kilometres up the new road to Khab. The junction is about 2km before the Sutlej River bridge and before the Spiti River joins the main valley. The village is of note, being the last 'camp' before the Shipki pass into Tibet.

> This is the point where ends the tolerable road of the Hindustan–Tibet trade route . . . A few hundred metres more and the road completely disappears completely in a very steep side ravine… the gorge (of the Sutlej) is a veritable abyss, bounded by a vertical wall along whose sides runs a mere suggestion of a path which looks over empty space. In Europe people would travel roped together, and here one thinks of making for a caravan pass (the Shipki pass.)
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Tashigang

The historic but very inaccessible monastery of Tashigang can be reached from Nako in good weather by hiking. Tashigang monastery lies on a high ridge overlooking the Sutlej, and is reached from Nako by crossing a pass. One would be advised to carry ample food, a lot of water and be prepared for very unstable rapidly changing weather. The trail initially heads up past the chortens and mani wall above Nako southwards to a rocky spur. Herders use this trail, but a local guide is essential as frequent landslides are a problem. We were unable to get far due to deep snow.

Tucci and Ghersi passed through Tashigang on their way to Tibet and learnt about the strange Chod practices that took place there. A gruesome ornament made of bones and human parts was used in the ceremonies. The chosen initiate had to undergo solitary meditations in the company of wrathful deities who represented his dark demonic side. These Chod practices came from the Shiche-pa sect.

The old route into Tibet descended to the Sutlej, which was crossed on an ancient wooden bridge before a further climb to Namgia, taking six hours for the seemingly short distance gained.

Nako

The Nako monastery (at 3800m) is located at the lower end of the Spiti River, high above the river to the north of the main road from Shimla. Today, following a massive slide across the road near Malling, Nako is now less than one kilometre off the new higher main road. Brooding over the village is the peak of Leo Pugyal (also spelt as Reo Puigail). The village remains essentially undisturbed, with a few newer buildings. Strictly speaking, this village and monastery is under the administration of upper Kinnaur today.

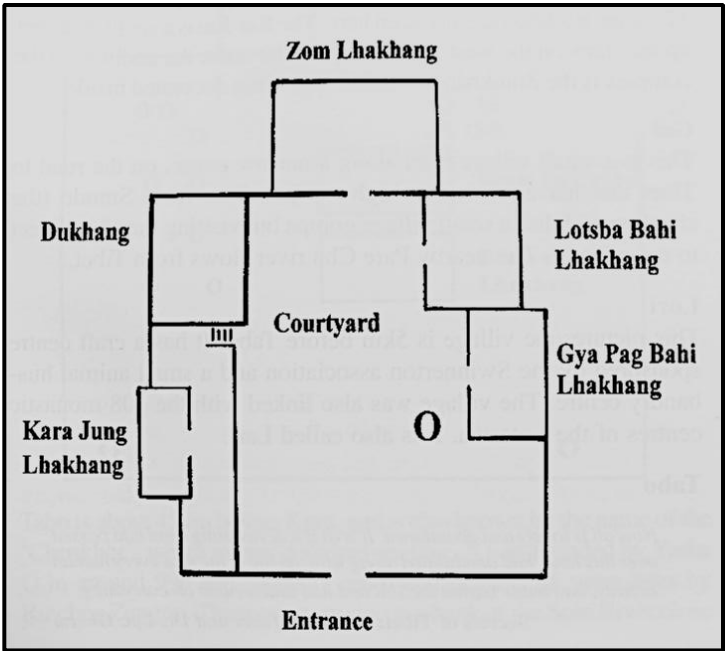
Nako's famed lake is fed by streams from Leo Pugyal. The deity of the mountain, Pugyal, is the guardian of the village and its herders. Goats and sheep regularly trek high up the hillsides seeking rough grazing, even in winter. The path leading up from the village towards Tibet, Tashigang and Shipki is marked by kani gates, mani walls and chortens. The footprint of Pugyal is supposedly in the double chorten structure above the village.

A larger former monastery can be seen high above here, with thirteen white chortens. A number of prayer wheel chambers and other chapels existed around the village; some evidence remains of these. These might once have been arranged in mandala style.

The translator, Rinchen Zangpo, founded this 'Choskhor'-style monastery. The monastery sits overlooking the deep canyon of the Spiti river on the west side of the village and is in need of repairs, but four ancient chapels remain plus a couple of newer chambers.

Currently under the control of the Druk-pa sect, it is being renovated by the 'Nako Preservation Project', with support from universities in Vienna, London and by the Romi Kholsa foundation in Delhi.

Plan of Nako Monastery



The main dukhang, called the Locha Bai Lha Lhakhang, houses the famous vision of Vairocana, in common with many monasteries of western Tibet and Ladakh. This imposing statue, known here as the Sarvavid Vairocana, is flanked by the four Dhyani Buddhas, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, Akshobhya and Ratna Sambhava. A Garuda guards high above Vairocana. Around the walls are large mandalas and 1000 Buddhas. Tamdrin and Channa Dorje guard the door. This chamber is particularly haunting and atmospheric.

The other chambers upstairs on the opposite side of the courtyard are the Lotsa Lhakhang, devoted to Rinchen Zangpo, and the GyaPag Pahi. This chapel houses paintings of the Sakyamuni flanked by his disciples, Shariputra and Maha Magdalayana, who are common throughout Spiti. Amitayus, Tara, Dorje Chang (Vajradhara) and the Medicine Buddhas are also seen here. The Kar Jun is a small chamber up the stairs on the west side and is for the nuns. A later addition to the complex is the Zomkhang.

Gui

This is a small village 8km along a narrow gorge, on the road to Tibet that leaves the main highway just 3km from Sumdo (the checkpost). It has a small village gompa but visiting may be subject to the military. The nearby Pare Chu River flows from Tibet.

Lori

This picturesque village is 5km before Tabo. It has a craft centre sponsored by the Swinnerton association and a small animal husbandry centre. The village was also linked with the 108 monastic centres of the Lotsawa. It is also called Lari.

Waiting for a lift into Spiti

Tabo

> Now all is lonely and abandoned. It is as if a devastating wind had passed over this land, had annihilated along with the life of the soul every human activity, had made barren the soil and had laid a curse on everything.
> **Secrets of Tibet: *Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi***

Tabo is about 45km before Kaza, and is also known by the name of the ‘Choskhor’, which means doctrinal enclave. It was founded by Yeshe O in around 996 and probably renovated perhaps 45 years later by Rinchen Zangpo. The monastery sits on a bank of the Spiti River close to a small village. High walls, called ‘cags ri’, surround the Tabo complex, as it is not built on any protective hillside. As at Alchi in Ladakh, one of Rinchen Zangpo’s walking sticks has supposedly given rise to a graceful peepal tree. On a hillside to the north is a small chapel and a number of caves north of the main temple complex containing poorly preserved murals.

The famous Tabo Gompa had a three-dimensional mandala configuration, which has been added to. As at Nako, the central deity is the Sarvavid Vairocana. It is the oldest functioning monastery in India and ranked second in importance to Toling in Tibet. This enclave has nine chapels and many stupas in differing degrees of decay. There are 10th and 11th century paintings in the main shrine. The stupas are more likely to have been founded in the 13th–14th centuries, while the other chapels have been dated to the 15th–20th centuries. Five chapels are said to be original. These are the Serkhang or golden temple; Kyil Lhakhang, the mystic mandala shrine; Tsug Lhakhang, the shrine of the enlightened gods; Byam Pa Chenpo Lhakhang, a Maitreya temple; and the Drontonpa (Dromton or even Brom-ston) Lhakhangs, dedicated to Drontonpa, a disciple of Atisha.

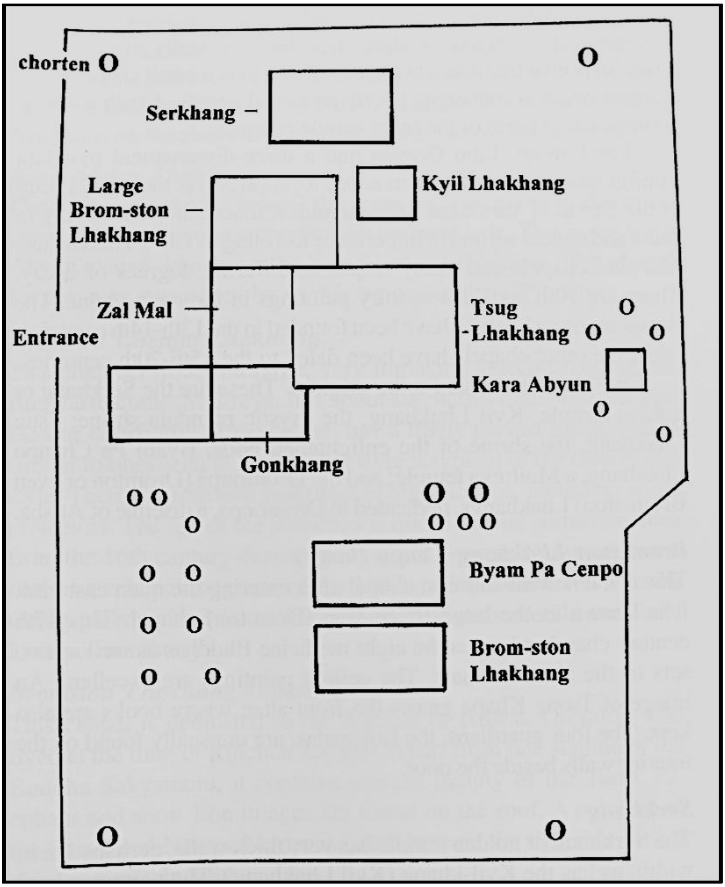
Brom-ston Lhakhang Cenpo (large)

This is the newest and first chapel after entering the main east gate. It is known as the large Brom-ston (Dromton) chapel. This 17th-century chamber houses the eight medicine Buddhas as well as two sets of the sixteen arhats. The ceiling paintings are excellent. An image of Tsong Khapa graces the front altar, where books are also kept. The four guardians, the Lokapalas, are unusually found on the interior walls beside the door.

Serkhang

The Serkhang or golden temple has very thick walls, perhaps 1m in width, as has the Kyil-khang (Kyil Lhakhang). The paintings here have probably existed since the time of Sengge Namgyal, the famous warrior and patron of Buddhism in Guge from Ladakh. Images of different Taras are prominent here, along with Sakyamuni, who is flanked by two Red Taras.

Plan of Tabo Choskhor


chorten
Serkhang
Large Brom-ston Lhakhang
Kyil Lhakhang
Zal Mal
Entrance
Tsug Lhakhang
Kara Abyun
Gonkhang
Byam Pa Cenpo
Brom-ston Lhakhang

Kyil Lhakhang

This small almost hidden chamber contains various mandalas, usually known as the mystic mandalas. The main mandala is of Vairocana; it has the same four faces and white colour seen at Alchi. It may date from the time of the Namgyal kings of Ladakh in the 16th century.

Kara Abyun Lhakhang

Continuing clockwise around the complex, you come to the small chapel isolated amongst chortens on the west side. This is the Kara Abyun chapel, known as the Temple of the Goddess. This chapel for the nuns was added by the Gelug-pas in the 17th century.

Byam Pa Chenpo Lhakhang

This chamber houses a large, very imposing stucco image of the Buddha to come, Maitreya. It is about six metres high. The wooden Deodar doorframe of the chapel has a finely carved image that is similar to ones seen at Alchi. This style is typical of the Gandharan style. There are fourteen paintings of significance, including some protectors. The age of the paintings is questionable; some may date from the 16th century during the reign of Sengge Namgyal. None of the current paintings are of the 11th century. Others relate to the Gelug-pa era with Tibetan images, notably of the Potala and Tashi Lhunpo monastery.

Bromston Lhakhang (small)

This chapel is dedicated to the disciple of Atisha, Dromton who lived at the time of Rinchen Zangpo. Apart from one statue of the Buddha Sakyamuni, it contains murals, mainly of the Taras. Elephant and snow lion images are found on the roof. A painting of the four-faced Nampa Namse is found here on the right side wall, a deity common in Spiti. In 1992 the well-known expert on Western Tibetan monasteries, O. C. Handa, discovered evidence that this chamber had been attacked by the Sikhs in 1937 and that repairs were undertaken with contributions from local villagers.

Tsug Lhakhang

Finally, coming full circle, we come to the most amazing chambers of the Tabo Choskhor. There are three main chambers plus an alcove here in the Tsug Lhakhang.

The ***Zal Mal*** is the first entry chamber which houses some more recent murals, showing the main Gelug-pa deities including Tsong Khapa, Green Tara, Tumyupa, Milarepa and Avalokiteshvara.

On the right is the secretive ***Gonkhang*** with paintings of Jamsing, Mahakala and the Vajra Bhairab protectors – Yamantaka, the protector of the Gelug-pa. There is a yab-yum of Guhyasamaja.

Continuing in, there is a small alcove area before the ***Tsug Lhakhang*** with animal guardians beside the doors. The main chamber is quite stunning, with thirty-two images of the Vajrayana deities in different mudra poses, set on individual platforms all around the outside walls, above eye level. Fire mantles back all the deities and all lend to an atmosphere of supreme mysticism; they are simply incredible. These thirty-two figures represent the complete mandala of the Vajradhatu, the full imagery of the different ways in which the Buddha came to enlightenment through meditations.

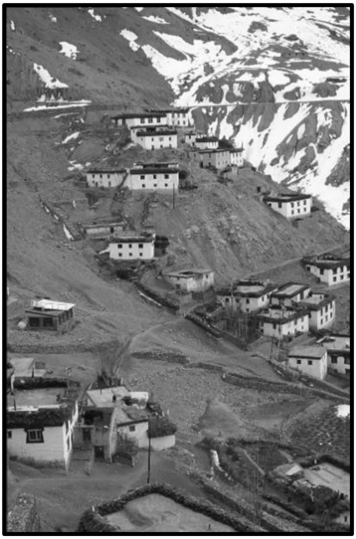
Finally, the four-fold images of Vairocana stand like the supreme head of all he surveys. In the chamber behind is Amitayus (Opagme in Tibetan), accompanied by the four Dhyani Buddhas standing.

Around the outside of this small room are walls painted exquisitely with the thousand Buddha images and two walls of the twenty-one Taras. The artwork in this chamber is stunning; the similarity with Alchi Dukhang in Ladakh is most striking. As in Alchi, Toling and Tsaparang, the wall paintings and murals belong to the style known as the Indian Kashmir/Nepalese art. Some call this the Ajanta style.

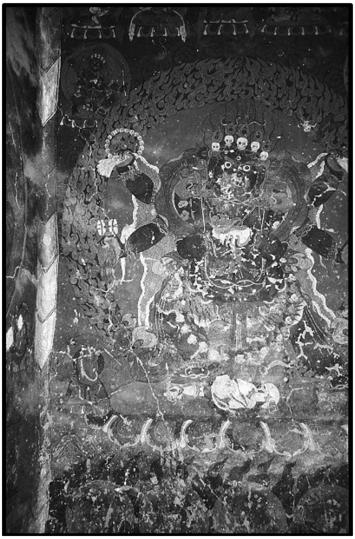
Dhankar

Dhankar lies at an altitude of 3870m and was the former seat of power in Spiti. It is located almost 9km up a steep hill from Shichling on the main road some 25km south of Kaza. It is sometimes referred to as the Lha O Pa monastery and is famed for its dank dungeon. Set on a dramatic ridge, the monastery presents a daunting yet stupendous setting. Below and around the monastery are stunningly sheer ramparts of strangely shaped sandstone features common in the northern Himalaya. Its name roughly translates to ‘shelters on high cliffs’. Its defensive system became known as the Dhankars and these places were used by the people to escape invaders.

Founded sometime between the 7th and 9th centuries, it therefore predates the great translator, Rinchen Zangpo. One legend recalls that an invading Ladakhi army was entertained at Dhankar after their unmolested advance on Spiti. Having plied them with drinks, the locals eventually threw them over the parapets to defeat.

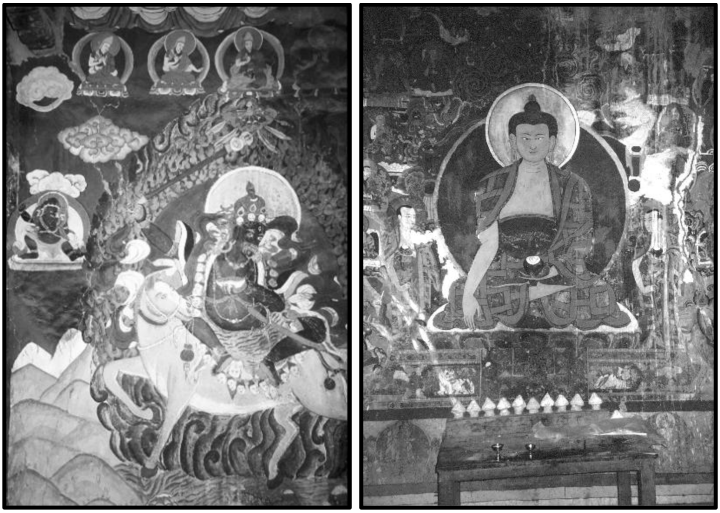


Dhankar village



Yamantaka

The monastery has five main chapels. The lower shrines encompass a large kitchen and two chambers. The lower one upstairs is the main assembly hall or Dukhang. Books flank the Sakyamuni and his two disciples. Above is another simply decorated chamber with one Buddha image and some other small rooms. Scrambling up the hill above the monastery is a small chapel This chamber, the Gogma Lhakhang, has some amazing murals. Eight Buddha figures drape the walls, including the Medicine Buddha.



Dhankar wall paintings

Local people inhabit the upper part of Dhankar. Their houses cling desperately to the weird pinnacled cliffs. High above these houses is the former dungeon with the dilapidated dzong high above. These are normally locked and the dzong is very unsafe. There is an extensive village strung across the hillside, with houses piled above each other in picturesque fashion. A very new monastery has recently been constructed before the main village. At certain times of the years a lake forms some 3km away.

Lhalung

Lhalung monastery is located in the Lingti valley, near the track to Attargu. A motorable road now leads up into this valley, which runs close to the Tibetan border. The village is at an altitude of 3550m and its gompa is another strongly linked to Rinchen Zangpo. In fact this region is most probably the ancestral home of the family of Rinchen Zangpo. Because the monastery is not located on any major trade route, it is assumed that it was built here in commemoration of the Lotsawa. It is possible that there were once nine chapels here; only the present Serkhang can be linked to any of these. If so many temples were built here, perhaps this monastery was also conceived in a similar fashion to Tabo or Alchi as a Choskhor enclave.

Today the monastery belongs to the yellow hat Gelug-pa sect, but it is possible that in former times it was a Sakya-pa establishment, and before that it was of the 11th century Kadam-pa. H. Shuttleworth, who carried out some studies, visited the monastery in 1924. We, unfortunately, were unable to reach it because of snow. However, through descriptions from Tucci, Romi Khalsa and O. C. Handa, we can visualise the Chapel of the Serkhang, which has fifty-one deities including the imagery of the Vajradhatu mandala within. Vairocana is the principal deity, an eight-armed version. Other deities here include Prajnaparamita with her consort Vajradhara (Dorje Chang), as well as the Dhyani Buddhas with their consorts.

Newer structures have since been added to the original complex, the entrance chamber and the Tengyur that houses a large prayer wheel. The white temple is a separate structure housing a Vairocana image. Also in the valley here is the Lingti village and a new hydro project nearer the main road. The Gya mountain on view from the valley stands at 6795m and is the highest peak in Spiti.

Kungri

The isolated Pin valley to the west of the Spiti River hosts the second oldest monastery in the region. A road now leads up the Pin valley from the bridge over the Spiti at Attargu. The road is prone to snow avalanches in spring and can be dangerous. The monastery is about 17km from the main road.

Some suggest that an original shrine predates the Guge era, but others suggest that the Kungri Gompa was probably consecrated around 1330AD. Six other small village monasteries exist in the valley. All the temples in the Pin valley belong to the Tantric Nyingma-pa sect, the oldest Tibetan Buddhist sect of Guru Rinpoche.

The structures at Kungri are now mostly of recent age with nearly all the ancient chambers suffering desecration under successive invaders. The monastery is characterised by the separate nature of the buildings. Many murals were burnt when the Sikhs plundered Spiti, and others suffered under Gulam Khan in 1841.

It is the customs in the Pin valley that have attracted the most interest. The monks tend to wear long braided hair and some lesser monks are married. If a head lama chooses to marry, he must give his eldest son to the tradition known as the Buzhan. The Buzhans are like wandering monk minstrels of Buddhist folklore. Many used to travel as far as Kulu offering their musical teachings.

Kaza

Kaza is the modern administrative capital of Spiti. It is divided into two parts. The older quarters on the southeast bank of the gorge contain a number of Tibetan-style houses rapidly being suffocated by ugly new construction. The northwest side of town is a modern Indian quarter, containing administrative buildings such as the Police Station and the District Commissioner's office, where one must go to obtain Inner Line Permits.

According to Tucci, the former monastery fortress of Kaza was accessed high above the town and beyond at over 4000m.

> "Under a burning sun, we begin the ascent leading to the monastery, which we glimpse through a cleft in the mountains, high above, on a living rock, perched there like a falcon's nest. We mount slowly along this road, if such it can be called, stony and incredibly steep, one cannot take a single step without slipping or causing a fall of stones."
>
> "The monastery is surrounded by lofty walls built on the verge of tremendous precipices. The massive walls, painted in stripes of white, red and black and having considerable slant, give the Gompa the appearance of a strong mediaeval fort. The hollow solemn sound of copper trumpets sounded by the monks in honour of the Lama…We are able to photograph the votive inscriptions… they are important because they preserve the names of the Gagas, as they were call the Nonos of Spiti."

We attempted to find the ruins of this once great citadel, having been given vague directions, not even certain of what to expect. The way was indeed ferociously steep up the rocky cliffs north of the new Shiva temple on the crags above a new monastery. Some 300m up and the going is still fearfully steep and loose, particularly in late March with snow around. Sadly the monastery eluded us, as threatening wintery clouds blew in from the northwest. On a good day one might need six hours to climb this mountain side and back, according to locals.

Today a new Sakya-pa monastery has been built in Kaza, just to the north of the gorge that divides the town. This houses wonderful new imagery and close by construction is going ahead for the visit of the Dalai Lama in 2008.

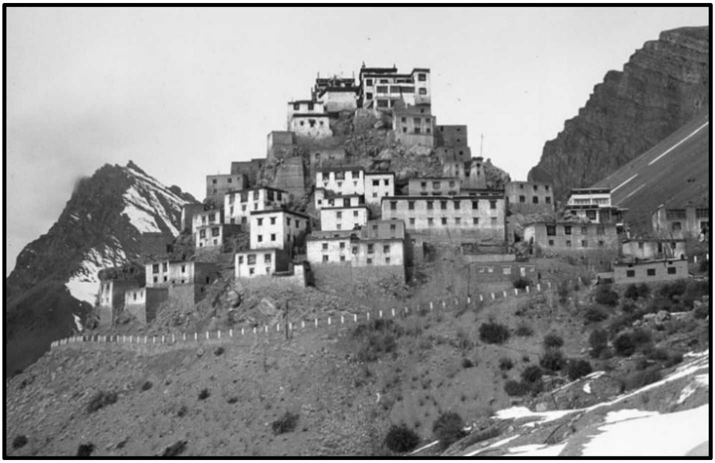
Komic

Near Komic village is the rebuilt Sakya-pa monastery of **Hikkim**, also known more commonly as the **Tangyud** Gompa. This is in fact the former Kaza monastery sought by us and described in fine detail by Tucci. It dates probably to the early 14th century, when the Sakya order swept across Tibet with the collaboration of the first Mongol advances. It has been linked to the great period of literary expansion by the Sakya-pa, hence its name, Tangyud. The Tengyur is a Tantric scripture of eighty-seven volumes. The general fortress-like appearance of the complex suggests that it was prone to plunder by powerful forces like the Mongols, who added their bit in the 17th century during the war between Tibet and Ladakh.

Ki

Ki monastery is the biggest in Spiti, standing in dramatic fashion on a hilltop at about 4154m (13500ft). Its buildings cling to the side of this steep-sided hill, perched precariously above the landscape. It can be accessed by road in about 45 minutes from Kaza.

The history of Ki is not well established, nor even when it was founded. Local tradition suggests it is linked to Dromton in the 11th century, but scholars do not agree. The most plausible idea is that the original monastery of the area was developed by Dromton, not on the haunting heights of Ki hilltop but below across the river Spiti at Rangrik, where a village still exists. The reasoning behind this is that monastic enclaves of the 11th century were generally built on flat land, as were Tabo, Alchi and Ngar-ma near Thikse near Leh.

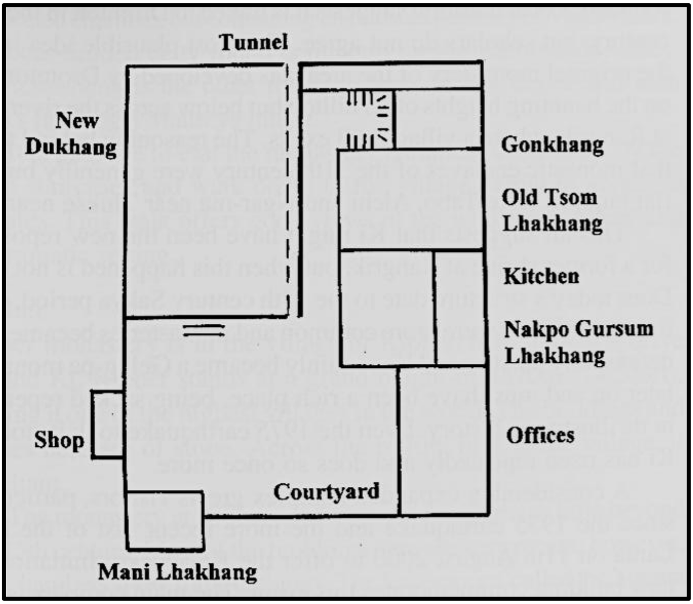


Ki Gompa

This all suggests that Ki might have been the new repository for a former shrine at Rangrik, but when this happened is not clear. Does today's structure date to the 14th century Sakya period, when foreign invaders were more common and monasteries became more defensively positioned? Ki certainly became a Gelug-pa monastery later on and must have been a rich place, being sacked repeatedly in its illustrious history. Even the 1975 earthquake took its toll, but Ki has risen repeatedly and does so once more.

A considerably expanded complex greets visitors, particularly since the 1975 earthquake and the more recent vist of the Dalai Lama on 11th August 2000 to offer the Kalachakra Initiations. A new building commemorates this event. The main complex is now built on three levels, with a large new Dukhang on the west side and expanded monk quarters. However, the sight of Ki remains dramatic and its older attractions are still as enticing as ever.

Plan of Ki Monastery

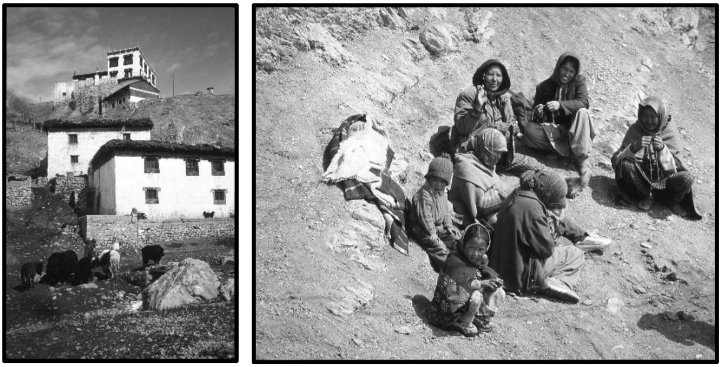


The lower level houses the monk quarters, a large kitchen, the Mani Lhakhang with its large prayer wheel, and up steps the new Dukhang, which has yet to be fully decorated inside. Of more historical interest are the chambers on the east side, accessed by small doorways. The Nako Gursum chamber is an amazing room with unusual angry fearsome protectors at one end at waist level. Here one can discern five protectors more normally found in the Gonkhangs of monasteries. These include Mahakala, Demchok with Dorje Phagmo perhaps, Yamantaka, the horse protector Palden Lhamo and two others not defined, one red and one yellow.

In the next room, the Tsom Lhakhang, are books and two chortens. Heading partly upstairs, next is the Gonkhang with its veiled images and masks. On the top level is the Kutang, a more basically decorated chamber, but containing an unusual painting of Vajra Varahi, the boar-headed deity found commonly in the Kathmandu valley. The Zimshung is the other room up here, with a throne and with books flanking a Maitreya image. It is possible to exit the monastery complex to the south by the steep staircases and walk down to the village below in about 30 minutes. This walk offers good views of the whole monastery and its dramatic setting.

Kibber

Kibber monastery is in the village of Kibber, 30mins drive beyond Ki. Kibber stands at a grand height of 4370m (14,200ft), making it one of the highest villages in the world. The buildings and houses here are of stone. Across the rolling hills is the village of Chicham.



Kibber monastery and visitors

The monastery at Kibber is of no great age, perhaps little beyond the 15th century. Most of the buildings here are very recent; however, two chambers show some antiquity. The lower room, called the Yogma Lhakhang, has a few older murals, one a protector on a horse and five lines of Buddha images. There is a large prayer wheel chamber next to this room. On an upper level is another older chamber, with books and thangkas of unknown vintage.

The reinstituted La Darcha fair takes place here in July. Formerly raiders and travellers came here from as far away as central Guge.

Losar

This village is located at the northern end of the Spiti valley; if approaching from Manali, it is the first village reached in Spiti. Losar has a small monastery. The Losar village has yak dances during the harvest period.

Dolanji Bon Monastery

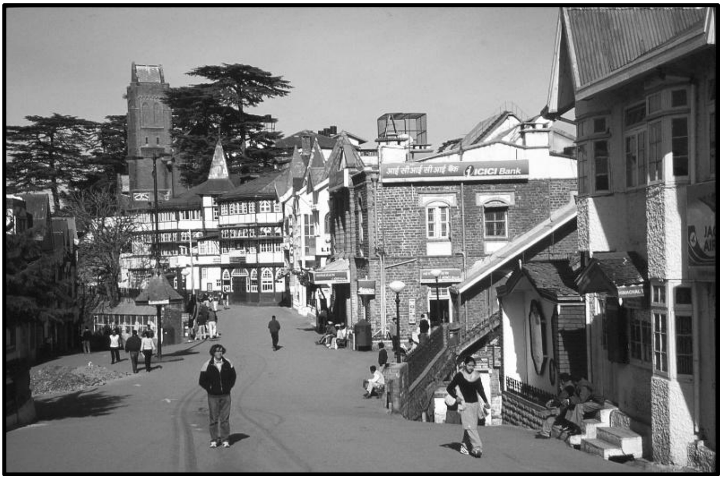
Not quite within the Guge region, this is of significance to those interested in the Bon faith as it remains today. This monastery, along with Triten Norbutse in the Kathmandu valley, offers a rare chance to see an active Bon centre.

The monastery, established in the mid-1970s, is located about 16km from Solan town, which is about midway between Kalka and Shimla. Also called New Menri after the original Bon monastery in Tibet near Xigatse, it is an extensive if isolated complex. The main Dukhang has a large image of Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, the principal Bon deity.

He is flanked by a thousand small images of the four Bon Lords. The Gonkhang is also of interest, but the main attraction here is the Bon Cham dance festivities at Losar New Year.

For Hindus, a magnificent Shiva temple is close by at Jatoli.

Dolanji Bon monastery



Shimla high street

CHAPTER TWELVE

Practical information

Visas

China/Tibet All foreigners require a visa to visit China, which must be obtained outside the country. In Kathmandu, group visas/permits for Tibet are normally issued only for the period requested, when you must be travelling in a group with a local operator. If you already have an individual Chinese visa, it might become invalid. For foreigners already in China, entry into the Tibetan region requires additional permits obtained in advance. Travel within China also has new restrictions on freedom of movement, hotels and transport. The situation changes regularly and without notice, so check with your local embassy for the latest information. See also www.tibettravel.org

India All foreigners require a visa to visit India. This must be obtained in advance and outside the country for regular tourist visas. Most tourist now apply for the e-visa online, which is relatively easy. At the time of writing, this visa allows entry only at 28 airports and 5 seaports: https://indianvisaonline.gov.in/evisa/tvoa.html. The main entry airports are Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, but other regional cities have been added. Thus far e-visas cannot be used for entry at land borders, but this might change, so check. Currently the visa lasts for two months with limited/multiple entry. Visitors taking the Hindustan-Tibet highway to Spiti also require an Inner Line Permit. This is issued in Shimla, Rekong Peo or Kaza. It requires two photos, a copy of passport details, Indian visa and may need a travel agent’s stamp (cost Rs100–150). The permit is issued free by the authorities. If issued in Kaza, a police stamp is also required. Check carefully to make sure the dates have been entered correctly!

Nepal All foreigners require a visa to visit Nepal. This can be obtained at the airport or land border on arrival, or in advance at a Nepalese embassy or consulate. Currently a 30-day visa costs US$50 and a 90-day multiple entry visa US$125. Check with your local embassy for the latest information re Covid etc. Special trekking permits are required for West Nepal and Upper Mustang.

Money

Most visitors have to use cash everywhere in Tibet, but credit/debit cards are usable and ATMs can found in most settlements in India. In rural areas and in case of any malfunctioning ATMs or cards, take sufficient cash.

Out in the Tibetan countryside, there is nowhere to change money, so make sure you get sufficient in Lhasa or at any border. The same applies to the mountain areas of India and Nepal. Changing money in Kathmandu is quick and easy.

> with the excuse of the ahimsa (the prohibition against killing anything which has life), one may force the foreigner to pay dearly for everything. If one has to sin, it is well to extract from the iniquity the highest possible profit.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Important note If you are going to Spiti and Kinnaur, change all the money you expect to spend there before leaving Shimla. Although there are State Bank of India branches in Rekong Peo, Tabo and Kaza, changing money is tedious if even possible. ATMs are rare.

Health

Tibet is still a wild land, where health and hygiene are not up to Western standards. The same applies to India and Nepal. Visitors should take care about what and where they eat. Do not eat unpeeled fruit or salads. Take care not to get dehydrated if you do get diarrhoea. Fortunately, guesthouses and hotels in Tibet provide boiled water in thermos flasks which can be used for a multitude of purposes.

As well as drinks, you can also ‘cook’ instant soup, pot noodles and powered mashed potato. Visitors would be wise to include such emergency food items, plus tinned fish, chocolate etc. on their trip list, and a small kettle for India and Nepal for convenience. Yet another quote, but it’s so apt!

> We ourselves, in order to quench our thirst have to fill our flasks with the turbid water of the Karitha, muddy and black as ink; it does no good to leave it to settle. It is so full of mica and sand that it seems almost as if one were swallowing the filthiest soup; and it is useless for allaying our thirst…
> But one cannot live forever on tinned stuff…
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**

Malaria is a risk in parts of India and Nepal, but not in Tibet. However, since most visitors travel to Tibet during the summer months from parts of India where malaria is present, you should ask your doctor for the latest prevention and treatment advice before you leave home. There are pharmacies in most of the larger villages. Elsewhere, you take your chances. Be sure to take plenty of stomach, throat and head cold remedies.

Be aware that even a minor accident could have dire consequences in Tibet, because of the remoteness of the area. Try not to fall over! The nearest hospitals are in Lhasa, Kathmandu, Shimla and Leh.

Altitude

Flying into Lhasa will present the visitor with a breathtaking shock, as the altitude is 3650m. The first day should be spent relaxing and drinking tea, soft drinks or water. Do not overexert yourself! Headaches may be expected, which can be treated with painkillers if necessary. We have found homeopathic coca tablets to be a great help at altitude. Walking slowly up the numerous steps to most monasteries may be necessary at first and stopping to take photographs is always a good excuse for a rest! Keep drinking lots of water to help acclimatisation.

Coming into Tibet from Kathmandu by road presents added risks, as the altitude gain is from 1300m to 3750m in Nyalam or a little lower in Kyirong. It would be wise to spend an extra day here, and certainly in Saga, before continuing to Kailash. Others spend time at altitude in Nepal beforehand. Trekking in from Simikot on the direct route may help acclimatisation, although there is still a big increase in altitude from the border to Darchen. Approaching Tibet via the Limi Valley means acclimatisation days soon after leaving Simikot, so it’s better to take this route when **leaving** Tibet.

Spiti, which lies mostly between 3800m and 4400m, is accessed by road either from Shimla (2205m) in the southwest, from the northwest via Manali and the Rohtang La (3978m) followed by the Kunzum La (4550m), or from Ladakh in the north via the Baralacha La (4950m) then the Kunzum La (4550m). Therefore similar problems with altitude should be expected, and the usual precautions, as described above, should be taken.

General equipment

Be aware that, although the summer sun can be hot during the daytime, it is extremely cold in Tibet once the sun sets. This also applies to Spiti and Ladakh. If you are going to Tibet, whether trekking or not, you will need a good four-season sleeping bag. Down jackets and overtrousers are also recommended for higher trips and will be appreciated even on lower-level trips. Strong walking boots with good soles are necessary for the Kailash Kora and may be more comfortable for walking around all the other sites too, as the ground is rough. Trekking through West Nepal and Mustang needs a full equipment list.

Maps

Many new maps are now available, with ever-increasing accuracy. The following maps are produced by Map House in Kathmandu:

Upper and Lower Mustang	1: 90,000
The Land of Bon: Upper & Lower Dolpo	1: 125,000
Karnali Trekking	1: 200,000

Far West (GHT)	1: 150,000
Rara Lake & Jumla	1: 150,000
Kailash/Manasarovar/Saipal BC	1: 200,000

For Spiti look for the Himachal Tourism map issued by the tourist board of Himachal Pradesh.

Getting to Kailash

The simplest options are either from Lhasa or Kathmandu. From Kathmandu there are two options – either by road via Kyirong (and when the road is repaired via Zhangmu), Saga and Paryang, or alternatively trekking in through West Nepal from Simikot. This requires domestic flights via Nepalgunj, and the trek takes six days or so from Simikot to the border at Hilsa, or less if the new road is complete and open. The Chinese/Tibetan border is crossed at Zer (Sher). A road climbs to Purang (Taklakot) and on to Darchen, past Gurla Mandhata and Lake Manasarovar.

The road from Kathmandu is long but scenic. Even though you have to go almost the same way there and back, the view in each direction is different and changes with the weather. For anyone who loves mountains and wild places, the drive is stupendous. With an extra day or two, a diversion to Everest Base Camp can be made on the return journey without too much extra mileage.

Indian pilgrims with lots of energy can trek from Darchula, allowing eight or nine days, crossing the Lipu Lekh pass and dropping down to Taklakot. The majority of Indian pilgrims fly to Simikot, take a short helicopter hop to Hilsa and drive in Chinese buses to Darchen. Most suffer with altitude problems; for a few this is very dangerous!

Transport and style of trip

There are various possibilities, all tightly controlled by the Chinese authorities with everything organised for the duration of the tour. The days of independent travel in Tibet are long gone.

The road to Kailash and Guge

Travel to Kailash will always be demanding, uncomfortable and tiring. It requires reasonable health and usually quite a pocketful of money. ‘Civilisation’ is far away, in Kathmandu or Lhasa. The main roads have been sealed but the mountainous terrain of the Himalaya is unpredictable, whether in Tibet, India or Nepal.

From Lhasa

Not the quickest option, but surely one of the most fascinating options is to begin from Lhasa. It remains a fascinating place despite the modern encroachments. Highlights of the city are the Potala, Jokhang temple, Barkor bazaars, Drepung, Sera and Ganden monasteries. Some visitors on arrival by air go along the Yarlung

Valley to Samye Monastery, Mindroling and the imposing Yambulakang (the probable palace of the first Tibetan king, Nyatri Tsenpo) before arriving in Lhasa. Srongtsen Gampo also used the palace fortress during his reign.

The road from Lhasa heads west to Xigatse (Shigatse) by one of three routes. The least-used northern route heads to Yangparchen and then crosses high passes, but offers vistas less visited. The faster route now goes along the Tsangpo gorges. The ‘historic’ route crosses the Kamba La and then goes along the shore of the beautiful Yamdrok Tso lake. Following the route used by Sir Francis Younghusband in 1903, it then crosses the Karo La to Gyangtse.

The Tibetan quarter of Gyangtse is an enchanting area,\ with its quaint houses, imposing fort and superb Kumbum monastery complex enclosing the amazing Palkor Choide Stupa. Xigatse is a couple of hours’ drive away. The Shalu monastery is south of this road. From Xigatse with its impressive Tashi Lhunpo monastery (and an enormous Maitreya image in one chapel), the road heads to Lhatse. From here the road follows the canyon of the Raka Tsangpo to Saga, joining the route from Kathmandu described below. An alternative longer option goes via Tingri, with views of Everest and Cho Oyu before heading via Lake Pekhu Tso to Saga.

From Kathmandu

Any trip to Tibet from Nepal will begin in the vibrant Nepalese capital of Kathmandu. A feast of delights awaits the guest. Be sure to visit the Durbar squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, the Swayambhunath complex and Boudhanath stupa. Other lesser-known places include Kirtipur, Bungamati, Kokana, Chapagaon, Dakshinkali, Pharping and Sankhu.

It is expected that the original route from Kathmandu into Tibet via Zhangmu and Nyalam will reopen, but in the meantime a new crossing has opened from the Trisuli Valley below Langtang at Rasuwa. From the border the road climbs through the ancient historic settlement of Kyirong below the peaks of the Ganesh Himal. Climbing ever higher, the road reaches the plateau below the western ranges of Xixapangma before descending to the town of Saga. From here the route heads west to Kailash.

From Kathmandu, before the devastating earthquakes of 2015 in Nepal, the drive to Kodari at the Tibetan border took around four to five hours. Along the way Dhulikhel has refreshments, with great views of the Himalayan chain. After crossing the border at the Friendship Bridge, the road climbs steeply to Zhangmu. The town used to be a hive of activity; trucks lined the narrow streets and there were often long traffic jams, as the road was just too narrow for trucks to pass. Chinese formalities were conducted efficiently here.

From Zhangmu the road climbs steeply up through an impressive gorge; in only one hour you will be in Nyalam, at 3700m, a breathtaking change in altitude. Take rest and lots of cups of tea to alleviate the symptoms of altitude, and preferably spend an extra day here exploring the valley below Xixapangma.

Soon after leaving Nyalam is the site of a cave where Milarepa meditated, and where a Kagyu-pa monastery has now been built. The road climbs up further to cross the Lalung La pass, with stunning views of the Himalayan peaks, in particular Xixapangma, Phurbi Chyachu, Dorje Lakpa, Gauri Shankar and Menlungtse.

Shortly beyond this viewpoint, a small track marked ‘no cars’ leads off to the left to Pekhu Tso lake, passing Mount Xixapangma. Five hours from Nyalam is a very primitive guesthouse close to the Pekhu Tso lake. From here the road crosses three passes before it reaches Saga (4300m). The drive takes about eight to nine hours from Nyalam. Saga has a limited variety of hotels and guesthouses.

Heading west, the route is varied, with low passes and some panoramic views to the south. It takes about five to six hours to reach Paryang from Saga. A couple of passes are crossed before reaching Drongba, where there is a guesthouse, café and very interesting monastery. Leaving Drongba the route is mostly level, as the road snakes past the mountains of Mustang in Nepal. Manaslu, Annapurna and Dhaulagiri may also be seen to the south.

There are some impressive sand dunes along here close to the Tsangpo River. Approaching Paryang, the valleys widens, with herds of yaks grazing. At sunset the plains turn a golden colour, complimenting the stunning mountain vista behind, the peaks of Upper Dolpo including the sharp spire of Danphesail.

From Paryang to Lake Manasarovar it takes about seven hours to complete the 250km. Once across the Maryum La you eventually come to a very blue lake called Gung Gyo. Known to the Bon as Gung Ghyu Gulmo, the lake is mentioned in Bon texts as one of the four lakes of Shangshung. The first view of Kailash is just before the village of Hor, marked by a large collection of prayer flags. Lake Manasarovar appears in view, dominated by Gurla Mandhata (7730m), called Namo Neni by Tibetans.

The turnoff to Chui Gompa beside Lake Manasarovar is about 15km further west. The village overlooks the Ganga Chu River that flows between the two lakes of Manasarovar and Rakhas Tal. A pleasant walk can be made from the village to the prayer flag-topped ridge to the south. The Parikrama walk around Lake Manasarovar takes four days or so, usually starting from Chui Gompa.

Return to Kathmandu or Lhasa

The brief notes below are given showing the points of interest with kilometre markers (shown on milestones in the side of the road) or distances from the start point.

Darchen to **Paryang** takes about six hours.

145km	Maryum La Pass
160km	teahouse for lunch
Km1520	spectacular mountain to the north
Km1605	Paryang

Paryang to **Saga** takes about five hours. It takes around two hours to reach Drongba. Look out for the following markers:

Km1760	Lhatsekang village
Km1794	an old, ruined fort
Km1805	a monastery on the northern hillside
Km1823	a small ruined gompa
Km1840	a pass
Km1845	Saga

Saga to **Zhangmu** direct, via Pekhu Tso, should take nine or ten hours. If the passes are blocked by snow you will have to go via Lhatse, which takes two days:

Saga to **Sangsang** takes around four hours. The road is now good and for some of the way cuts through the Raka Tsangpo gorges. At 40km is a pass. Later the scenery is gaunt and stark, with endless ranges of jagged mountains.

63km	Raka
Km2025	Sangsang (The guesthouse on the east side of town is quite cosy, but toilets are not so good!)

Sangsang to **Zhangmu** is a very long haul and takes about ten hours. Sangsang to Lhatse is about 115km and two hours' drive. East is the road to Xigatse, Gyangtse and on to Lhasa. A new direct road has opened along the Tsangpo River gorge east of Xigatse. To Shegar takes five hours; there are several options for lunch here. It is a further five hours to the border.

Km2085	Namring
Km2140	Lhatse junction
Km5264.5	turnoff to Pekhu Tso
Km5290	Lalung La pass
Km5334	Milarepa cave
Km5345	Nyalam
Km5375	Zhangmu

Tibet

Accommodation in Tibet

The main cities of Lhasa, Xigatse and Gyangtse have good choices. Accommodation in rural Tibet is more primitive! Since all travel to Tibet is currently rigidly controlled, there is little point in listing places that we used during a more independent travel period. Rural areas have more leeway, but fewer good options.

Lhasa

Old favourites still going include the Banak Shol. The Snowlands building is now a restaurant. See the usual booking websites for a large selection, but probably your Chinese travel agent will handle the hotel choices. This applies across Tibet.

Driving from Lhasa to Qinghai in 2011

The best view in the world? Well, maybe!

The rooftop toilet at the Tibetan Yak Hotel in Paryang, in a nice courtyard, has a view without comparison. Three parallel holes for women and the same for men, with a low wall separating the two sexes.

To the south are the Nepalese Dolpo Himalaya, which at sunset cast a golden glow over the plains south of Paryang. The mother and daughter had some of the best examples of Tibetan turquoise headdresses see anywhere.

Qomolungma National Park & Rongbuk

The Park was established in 1989 and all travel is organised by the Chinese Agency. The turn off to the park is at about Km5145 on the main road. It takes three hours to drive the 90km. The Pang La pass (5120m) has stunning views of Everest and Gyachung Kang. From there the road drops down to the Dzaka valley. The drive is dramatic and well worth doing if you have the time and are well acclimatised. **Beware** of the altitude though and take it slowly walking about. Ideally trek here from Tingri. Rongbuk Monastery is at an altitude of 4990m/5000m. This Nyingma-pa monastery was established around 1902. The walk to Base Camp (5200m) from here takes around two hours, passing first the Rongchung retreat, then the rebuilt Sherab Choling hermitage high up on the left. Only those already well acclimatised should contemplate the trek from Base Camp into the East Rongbuk Glacier Valley towards Camp 1. This valley is characterised by ice pinnacles leading to the North Col.

Kailash Kora Trek

Permits

Any permits will be obtained by the travel agent.

Porters and yaks

These are also now arranged by the trekking agent. Tips are of course appreciated.

Darchen

This is the starting location for the trip. The name Darchen means ‘place of the large prayer flag’. In Darchen there is a monastery called Drukpa Gompa. A chorten and mani wall, near the small gorge where the two rivers that drain the Inner Kora area meet, serves as the start and finish of the Kora. A new Swiss-financed monastic museum and clinic are close by. Darchen has ever better hotels to cater to Indian pilgrims, but standards started from a very low base. Most groups, (and there are not many these days) camp on the Kailash Kora with porterage, tents and food included. Independent trekking is not on offer now.

Driraphuk

The monastery guesthouse had basic rooms. More rooms are found below the gompa. No food was available here, but thermoses of boiled water are provided for a fee; you can prepare your own mashed potato and soup to supplement any offerings from the agent!

Zutrulphuk

The monastery had rooms attached to its courtyard, but don’t count on using them.

Nepal

Kathmandu

There is a very wide choice to suit all tastes; we cannot possibly list them all. In Thamel try the Hotel Moonlight in Paknajol, or the Kathmandu Guest House, another popular choice. Others include the Hotel Utse, Potala Guest House, Thamel Eco Resort, Manang, Marshyangdi and Vaisali for a start. Elsewhere and more upmarket are Hotel Malla, Hotel Ambassador, Hotel Shankar, Tibet Hotel (a good choice for Tibetan ambience before you go), Yak and Yeti, Radisson and Dusit Princess.

Kodari

Eco Resort was 15mins just steeply uphill before the town on the border of Nepal and Tibet. It was badly affected by the earthquakes and remains effectively closed until the road reopens.

Syabrubesi

Lodges are basic but adequate for a night near the border.

Mustang

The lodges have improved a lot, with some good options in the main overnight stops. Jomsom has a wide selection of good lodges.

Nepalganj

The Siddhartha Hotel is a good option in this hot dusty town if an overnight is required.

Simikot

Trekkers’ lodges are the main choice, with a few better places for mountaineers and Kailash Kora pilgrims.

Old area of Simikot

India

Arrival in Delhi

Delhi is where most visitors arrive to visit the north. (In the past international flights also arrived in Amritsar). With so many places in the Paharganj area of the capital, no one will be stuck for budget choice. ‘Prince Palace’ (not much of a palace though!) is a bit tacky. Cottage Yes Please is good for the price. The Malhotra restaurant is close by, with afternoon tea a relaxing option at the Hotel Metropolis (which has rooms). The YMCA on Jai Singh Road operates a good restaurant and has reasonable rooms. For more comfort, check the usual websites. After all the rough and tumble of the road and lack of inspiring food (or any food so to speak in winter), don’t forget Kwality for dinner and Nirula’s if it’s reopened in Rajiv Chowk. Loads of new restaurants are found around Rajiv Chowk (formerly Connaught Place). The new Delhi metro is excellent and has a line to the International Airport, so no more hassles on arrival.

Getting to Ladakh

The fastest way to Leh in Ladakh is to take the 50-minute direct flight from Delhi. Air India, Indigo and others have early morning flights to Leh. Some flights are routed via Jammu and perhaps Chandigarh. Other flights go to Srinagar in the Kashmir valley. Check the latest security situation before committing to this route. In winter, October to May, Ladakh can only be reached by air.

Road routes to Ladakh open some time in May. Two routes exist. The usual and safer one is via Manali, Rohtang pass, Baralacha pass and into the Indus valley from the southeast. The older traditional route was from Srinagar over the Zoji La pass to Dras and then to Kargil and Leh. Currently security concerns may make this hazardous. Either way, a bus takes two days.

Leh to Manali (approx.)	450km
Leh to Srinagar	434km

Getting to Spiti

The main access to Spiti is from Shimla in Himachal Pradesh. A train named the ‘Himalayan Queen’ runs daily from New Delhi via Ambala and Chandigarh to Kalka. Here you must change to the narrow gauge Toy Train or take a bus to Shimla. The toy train takes nearly six hours. Bring your own food. In summer, access to Spiti is possible from Manali via the Kunzum La pass.

The India-Tibet highway, which is supposedly open all year round, follows the lower reaches of the River Sutlej through the town of Rampur to Rekong Peo. Landslides can hinder travel from here to Spiti. The road goes to the administrative capital, Kaza, via Rampur, Puh (Poo) and Tabo. From Kaza the main sights are Kibber, Ki, Dhankar, Lhalung and the Pin valley. September into October is normally a good period to visit. In winter, delays may be expected. After late March might be the best time, before monsoon rains come to breach the road again.

Buses leave from the Rivoli bus station for Narkanda, Rampur and Rekong Peo in the mornings. (Beware of the so-called deluxe buses; these buses drive faster as a general rule.) After various journeys along this epic road, we decided to take the slower local or regional buses to keep our nerves more intact.

Bus fare to Rekong from Rs400. Some share Jeeps or 4X4 vehicles ply the route. You can hire your own vehicle, which allows a degree of control over the driver's speed but then again – this is India!

The Hindustan–Tibet Highway

The Hindustan–Tibet Road must rank as one of the world's most dramatic routes. There are very few roads open to tourists across the Himalaya and on to the Tibetan plateau, and all are pure drama. A brief description is given here of this fabulous but nerve-racking route. It takes a minimum of two days to cover the 421km from Shimla to Kaza by bus or jeep.

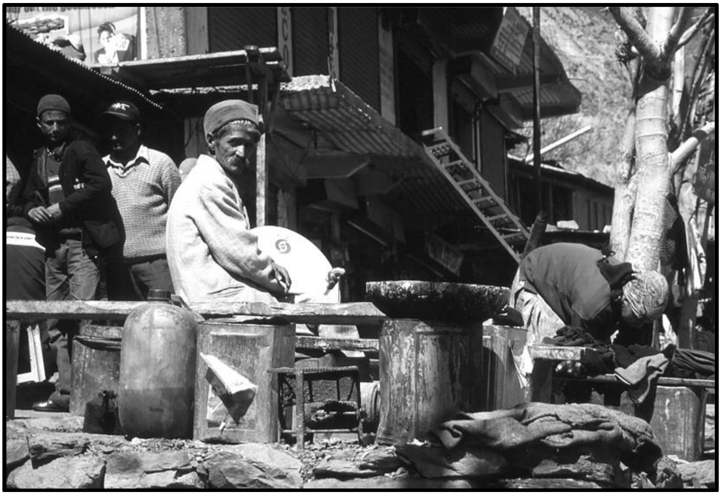
Leaving Shimla, the road (NH22) winds in and out of the hillsides and rapidly developing villages and towns to Narkanda. It takes about two hours to reach this high place at 2700m. Himalayan views are offered from here, as well as winter skiing. From Narkanda the road plunges some six thousand feet down, initially in superb forest of pine and deodars, and then into terraced fields to the River Sutlej. The river valley is quite hot and scrubby, but there are a few traditional Nepali-style villages left. A wide fast road leads to Rampur, a busy town with a couple of Hindu temples. The 130km to reach Rampur from Shimla takes about five hours in a local bus (four and a half by deluxe bus).

Twenty-five km from Rampur along a good road is Jeoli, where one might have to change buses to visit Sarahan. The bus takes around 45 minutes. Continuing along the main highway, the road climbs higher and higher above the river, with frankly terrifying drops.

At some points it is at least 250m above the river, and for one section the road is cut out tunnel-like from a sheer rock wall of tremendous proportions. After Wangtu the road is prone to flooding from Tibet.

The road up to Sangla and the Baspa valley diverges at Karchham. Passing a new dam and hydro installation, this side road also clings desperately to the nearly sheer valley sides. At 10km up here is a tiny roadside temple with a resident sadhu blessing all who pass – they surely need it, for the road is prone to terrible landslides as it approaches the valley crest (and new dam). Sangla and nearby Kamru with its tower temple offer pleasant retreats.

The main road eventually hammers its way through to Powari and then climbs to Rekong Peo, a pleasant town set on a shelf with wooded terraces above. The view across the valley to Kinnaur Kailash (6050m) and Raldang Peak (to the west) are tremendous and improve even more from Kalpa above. (The one-hour walk down from Kalpa to Rekong is very pleasant.) A short cut road leads out of Rekong towards Puh. The scenery is now increasingly drier, with apricot and cherry trees becoming less abundant.



Roadside action en route to Rekong Peo

After Ribba the improving but narrow road reaches Jangi, where the Inner Line permits are checked. Soon after is an impressive Kinnauri fort and Morang village with its gompa above. At Speilo one may take tea, with a view of Kanam village above. Puh, the next place, is a larger settlement; the road is mostly tarred along here. The Sutlej is crossed at Dabling village and then begins some spectacular scenery as the canyon walls become impossibly sheer. As you cross the Sutlej there is a stunning view up the valley towards Tibet, which is a mere 15km away here. The jagged ramparts of Leo Pugyal enhance the view to the north of the river.

Once across the Sutlej, the road cuts into sheer rock walls as it begins to climb beside the Spiti River. It snakes up and up, seemingly forever, into side canyons and hillsides before emerging high above the river and onwards up to Nako. This is the most tremendous part of the entire route along here and beyond Nako to Chango.

We had the pleasure of walking at least 15km of the road from Nako towards Chango across the Malling slide, but the views are amazing.

Buses link Rekong to Nako, and connecting buses go on to Kaza. If there has been a landslide, transport normally runs each side and connects, supposedly at around midday or so. Passengers will need to walk across any landslide to find onward vehicles to Kaza.

Formerly the road used to go from Yangthang, 7km below Nako, direct to Chango, but with the massive slide of 2000, a new road now climbs almost to Nako, adding 13km extra to the trip. From Nako a new tarmac road climbs past Malling village to the upper reaches of the slide. After the landslide zone, the route drops steadily down in a series of dramatic turns into weird erosional terrain to the Spiti River at Chango. The Himalaya are clearly seen from this area above the landslide. The river is some four thousand feet below too, a rich turquoise ribbon of colour in the barren treeless desert uplands.

Following the west bank of the Spiti river, the road now bumps its way along the canyon floor through Shelkar village to Sumdo, where the Inner Line Permit is checked again. At this point the river Pare Chu drains from Tibet, again very close by. After Sumdo the road climbs steadily through Horling to Lari, a picturesque village, and on to Tabo. Set on a sunny shelf, Tabo is a relaxing retreat from the rigours of the road. The monastery is fascinating. It takes around four hours to drive from Nako to Tabo, plus any delay time.

A further hour of steady but gradual climbing brings one to Shichling village and the turn off for Dhankar. Soon the road to Lingti valley is seen on the right, and then at the bridge called Attargo is the road to the hidden Pin valley and Kungri monastery. The Pin valley is forbidding terrain, with sheer craggy cliffs and a desolate air of lost worldliness. It’s a further 23km to Kaza and some semblance of comfort (in summer only). Ki and Kibber are a further half hour and one hour further on respectively. In summer the road continues to Losar and the Kunzum La pass. (Another three days brings one to Ladakh, but that’s another story).

Summary of distances

Shimla to Narkanda	65km
Narkanda to Rampur	75km
Rampur to Sarahan	40km
Rampur to Rekong Peo	100km
Karchham to Sangla	17km side trip
Rekong Peo to Nako	86km
Nako to Tabo	65km
Tabo to Kaza	47km

Accommodation in Ladakh and Spiti

The places listed below are ones we used on our trip, but for the latest selections it's best to check the well-known hotel booking websites. Some places change names and others upgrade. Post-Covid, expect some changes and some closures.

Leh

Leh in Ladakh offers hundreds of guesthouses. Jigmet Hotel/Guest House is open all year. Other old favourites are the Antelope, New Moon, Himalaya, Dreamland, Yak-Tail, but there are many new ones in Chube and Changspa, both northern suburbs of Leh. For greater comfort try the Hotel Lasermo.

Elsewhere in Ladakh, accommodation has improved in choice and quality, as more domestic tourists explore the region.

Shimla

There is a wide choice, from the budget Hotel Uphar and the YMCA to the Hotel Mayur – a wonderful old colonial house, Hotel Combermere, Hotel Oyo Woodlands, Hotel Woody Banks, Oberoi Cecil's and Clarke's, are great places for afternoon tea. There's good food at Asiana on the square and breakfast at Baljee's or, for a splash, visit the Hotel Combermere.

Solan (for Dolanji)

Look out for Hotel Thakur, Hotel Mayur near the station, with good food. Hotel Pratiksha, Sherpa Eco Resort, Wonderful Stay, Pine Drive and a few others are listed.

Narkanda

The only reasonable place to stay is the Hotel Huta, HPTDC retreat, nicely located in the trees west of the road.

Rampur

Satluj View Guesthouse and HPTDC Bushahr Regency with good food. The settlement runs along the river, with quite a lot of transport-style places for rooms and food, but most are scruffy.

Sarahan

For atmosphere more than comfort, although it's fine, try the Temple Guesthouse outside the main entrance of the complex. Eat at the HPTDC Hotel Srikhand, a fabulously designed complex. Its rooms are more expensive, but not so much more considering the style.

Rekong Peo

Hotel Snow View is near the bazaar, Dormico's Jeevan Jyoti just up from the bazaar has OK food. Shivling View Hotel is uphill near the bus station, but getting a view of Shivling from there is a fantasy. Others are Hotel Fairyland above the bazaar, Deepak Homestay, Hotel Grand Shambhala. For eating, try the Mehefil Restaurant.

Kalpa

The Chini Bungalow looks like a nice place for the season. Higher up is the HPTD Hotel Kinner Kailash, a superb retreat with good food and service.

Speilo

This is a small roadside service village, with good Nepali cafés and cheap local lodgings in an emergency.

Dabling

In the unlikely event of needing a room here, look for 'Hotel' Desert Rose.

Nako

The choice is limited; try Tashi's Home or the Reo Purguil. Before the village is the Lovon Guesthouse. The road after Nako is subject to frequent landslides, so expect possible delays. It runs right up along the Tibetan border.

Chango and Shelkar

If really pushed here, try the Himalayan in Chango and the Everest 'Hotel' in Shelkar. They might have closed because of Covid.

Tabo

Tabo is a great place to stay. For atmosphere try the Millennium Monastery Guesthouse, also Peaceful Monastery and Guesthouse, Green Tara House Homestay, Zostel Homes, Namsay Homestay, and Himalaya Ajanta Guesthouse with a good restaurant – open in winter.

Dhankar

Look for Dolma Guesthouse in Shichling not far away. The Monastery Guest House, Dhankar Homestay, Rabsal Homestay, Tenzing Homestay, Mochilero Ostello and Manirang Homestay and Café are other choices here.

Kaza

Very few are open in winter; try the Tibetan-style ones. Sakya Abode, Hotel Dayzor, Zangchuk, Kesang Homestay, Nomads Cottage and Tenzay. Zostel, Piggy Hostel, Moustache Kaza, Spiti Village Resort, The Travellers Shed, Tandi Sarai and others.

The police station and Inner Line Permit offices are in the Indian area across the river. Ask around.

Kibber

There are a couple of places to stay. Try the Norling Homestay and the Serkong Mud Homestay/Guesthouse.

Rewalsar

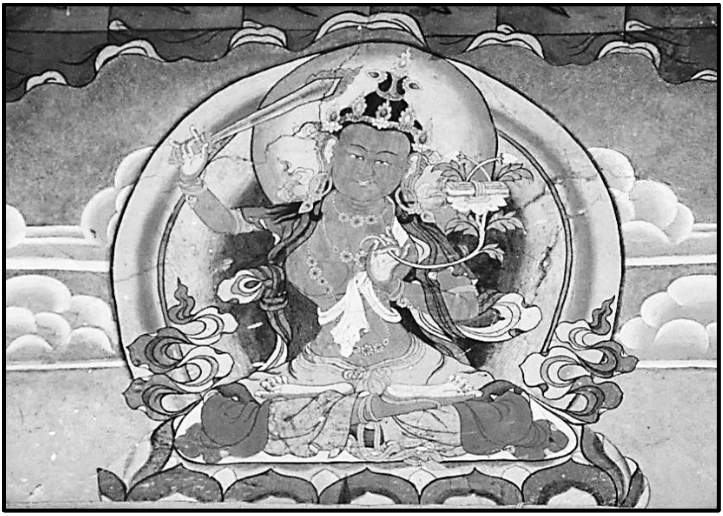
Although well outside the Guge region, the ancient Nyingma-pa monastery at Rewalsar may interest those visiting Shimla. The legend linking Padma Sambhava to Zahor, concerning his powers to withstand the burning fires, is said to have taken place here. Padma appeared seated on a lotus following the fire. This shrine is linked to Mandarava, one of Guru Rinpoche's consorts, who is said to have meditated in a well here, being the 'Goddess of the Well.' Rewalsar is about 150km from Shimla by road, close to Mandi.

Transport costs

A bus from Shimla to Rekong Peo costs Rs500–800. Generally buses are cheap and even hiring a taxi/jeep with driver is not unaffordable from around US$45.

Kaza–Kibber–Komic–Kaza Trek

This popular culturally inclined trek is an easy four-day hike. There are views over the Spiti river valley and of the highest mountain in Spiti, Gya. In Kaza check Sakya Tours near the bus depot for information. In Shimla check with Band Box Heights or any other agency. Many agencies can also get the Inner Line Permit.



Manjushri image at Ki monastery

Monasteries linked to Rinchen Zangpo

The following information has been included for added interest. The list is an abridged version taken from various sources, some being Pel Yeshe, a biographer of the Lotsawa, Joseph Gergan and O. C. Handa. Some of the ancient names are given, but some links may be uncertain. The list is far from complete or necessarily totally accurate. More than forty monasteries have disappeared into the mists of history.

Tibet
Toling, Mangang, Dongpo, Tiak, Tsangmed near Tiak, Puri (Purkhar?) near Shipki, Nehu (Nu? near Luk western Guge), Drilchung in the Jangthang valley, Kyiniphuk/Trapa, Rabgeyling (Rgyu-lang?), Shangtze, Shang, Khatze (Go-Khar?) near Sarang/Puling-west of Tsaparang, Ri or Richoba (Ri-Khri?) and possibly Dungkar (Yangskur?) plus Piyang (Nye-vang?).

Kinnaur
In the Baspa-Sangla valley, no remains. Charang near Morang, Ribba, Kanum, Powari (Bonri) below Rekong, Kalpa-Chinni (Horbulanka), Puh (Sissu and Pu), Ropa (Ro-pag), Dabling (uncertain), Nako, Chango (Trang?), Shelkar, Gui and Kaurik (uncertain).

Spiti
Dhankar (Gran-mkhar), Hikkim (Kyi-Khyim), Lha-Lung, Lari, Tabo, Kibber (Ki-bar, no longer existing), Rangrik no longer existing – now Ki, Kungri-may predate Rinchen Zangpo.

Zanskar
Sani, Khanji, Stong-de (Ston-pa me-mehi-dgon-pa), Sho?

Ladakh
Sle-Tlemo Leh (three places), Spituk (Is it Ati-tse?) – it has links by tradition, Sabu, Nyar-ma near Thikse, plus four other no longer existing, Markha valley, Sumda near Phyang, East of Basgo, Alchi by association only, Mangyu, Lamayuru as Yungdrung (might be Gyun-drum?), Wanla, Wakha, Chigtan (Gei-tsan?), Mundig, Mulbeck and Hunder (two temples) in Nubra.

Lahaul
Jholing (Zho-ling)

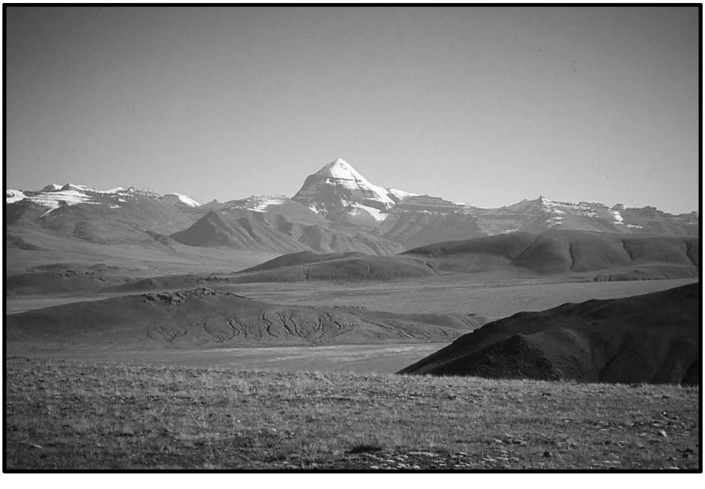
> It’s the beginning that’s the worst, then the middle, then the end. But in the end, it’s the end that’s the worst.
> **Samuel Beckett**

The last word

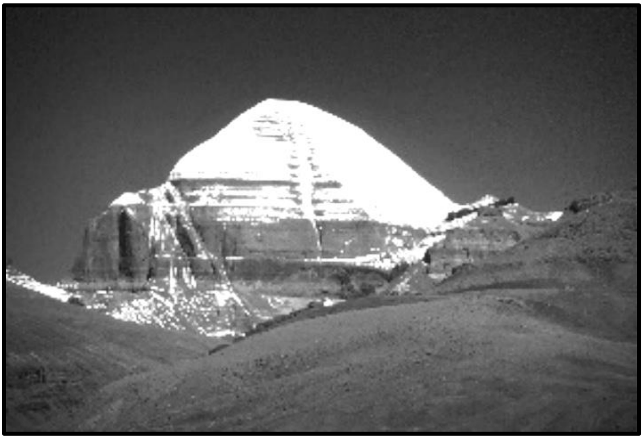
To visit the ancient lands of Shangshung, Guge, Ladakh, Spiti and northern Nepal today may not be such a time-consuming endeavour as it was for all the explorers, adventurers, traders and seekers of enlightenment of bygone days. Yet much of the greater Shangshung region remains isolated and little known to this day. Even with the modern aids at our beck and call, a journey to any part of the region still involves hardship, poor living conditions and an element of danger for those unwise enough to be unprepared.

However, the joys of reaching Kailash or Tsaparang, the rugged terrain of Spiti below the Shipki pass and the fascination of Alchi, Tabo, Mustang and the Limi Valley – places of masterful works of religious art – far outweigh such deprivations. The Lands of the Tantric Mountain are truly astonishing.

> We turn round, as if to say farewell to the road we have travelled, as one might take leave of a dear friend; caravan life accustoms one to this love of the road. That long, weary march, that desperate attack and conquest of mountain peaks, those venturesome descents, all give one a feeling of intimate kinship with the country. We recall the various incidents, the horrors and the fascination; civilisation makes us the gift of speed but detaches us from this direct contact with nature; the motor carries us onward, almost abducts us, and the country flees from in front of us before we have been able to fix our impressions of it, vanishes swiftly, is lost like a far-off dream.
> ***Secrets of Tibet*, Giuseppe Tucci and Dr. Cpt. Ghersi**



Prayer flags near Gurla Mandhata



Kailash South Face and Tsaparang citadel (below)

APPENDICES

Appendix 1:
Trek summaries and suggested schedules

Grading

The degree of difficulty is defined in the following grades. The grades are relative but remember that there's hardly a flat area in Nepal.

Easy (A) – still requires effort with sections of steep ups and downs.

Moderate (B) is harder, including higher altitude.

Strenuous (C) involves steep climbs and exposed paths with some at altitude.

All treks listed require trekkers to be in good physical shape beforehand.

Note: Jeep or bus journeys are indicated as approximate. Elsewhere timings are split for jeep + trek time etc.

Paryang monastery

Trekking routes — Time

Mount Kailash Trek (C)

Day 1	Kathmandu – Nepalganj	1hr flight
Day 2	Nepalganj – Simikot	1hr flight
Day 3	Simikot – Dharapori	4½–5hrs
Day 4	Dharapori – Kermi	4½–5hrs
Day 5	Kermi – Yalbang	5–6hrs
Day 6	Yalbang – Tumkot	5½–6½hrs
Day 7	Tumkot – Yari	5–6hrs
Day 8	Yari – Thadodhunga	4–5hrs
Day 9	Thadodhunga – Hilsa	6–8hrs
Day 10	Hilsa – Taklakot	2–3hrs drive
Day 11	Taklakot – Darchen	2–3hrs drive
Day 12	Darchen – Damding Donkhang	6–7hrs
Day 13	Damding Donkhang – Driraphuk	2–3hrs
Day 14	Driraphuk – Zutrulphuk	8–10hrs
Day 15	Zutrulphuk – Darchen	4–5hrs
Day 16	Darchen – Paryang	4–5hrs drive
Day 17	Paryang – Saga	5–6hrs drive
Day 18	Saga – Zhangmu	5–6hrs drive
Day 19	Zhangmu – Kathmandu	5–6hrs drive
Day 20	Spare	

Note:
When the Simikot to Hilsa road is completed, this will theoretically take only one day, but allow extra days when planning to allow for landslides, lack of vehicles and other unforeseen issues!

Alternative via Lhasa

Day 17	Saga – Shigatse	5–6hrs drive
Day 18	Shigatse – Gyangtse	3–4hrs drive
Day 19	Gyangtse – Lhasa	5–6hrs drive
Day 20	Lhasa	
Day 21	Lhasa	
Day 22	Lhasa – Kathmandu	1hr 10min flight

Trekking routes **Time**

Limi Valley Trek (B/C)

Day 1	Kathmandu – Nepalganj	1hr flight
Day 2	Nepalganj – Simikot	1hr flight
Day 3	Simikot – Dharapori	4½–5hrs
Day 4	Dharapori – Kermi	4½–5hrs
Day 5	Kermi – Yalbang	5–6hrs
Day 6	Yalbang – Tumkot	5½–6½hrs
Day 7	Tumkot – Yari	5–6hrs
Day 8	Yari – Thadodhunga	4–5hrs
Day 9	Thadodhunga – Hilsa	6–8hrs
Day 10	Hilsa – Manepeme	5–6hrs
Day 11	Manepeme – Chyang Lungma	5–6hrs
Day 12	Chyang Lungma – Tiljung	3–4hrs
Day 13	Tiljung – Halji	2–3hrs
Day 14	Halji – Jang	4½–5½hrs
Day 15	Jang – Traktse	3–3½hrs
Day 16	Traktse	Side trips
Day 17	Traktse – Talung	5–6hrs
Day 18	Talung – Tshongsa	7–8½hrs
Day 19	Tshongsa – Chadog	5–6hrs
Day 20	Chadog – Lek Dinga	5–6hrs
Day 21	Lek Dinga – Simikot	7–8½hrs
Day 22	Simikot – Kathmandu	2 flights
Day 23	Spare day or flight from Nepalganj	

Alternatives

Day 8	Yari East – Hilsa	1hr drive + 5hrs
Day 11	Manepeme – Tiljung	8–9hrs
Day 19	Tshongsa – Kermi	6–7hrs
Day 20	Kermi – Dharaphaya	5–6hrs
Day 21	Dharaphaya – Simikot	4–5hrs
Day 22	Simikot – Nepalganj	flight
Day 23	Nepalganj – Kathmandu	flight

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Appendix 3: Glossary

> If you are a teacher, try not to merely transmit knowledge, but try at the same time to awaken your students' minds to basic human qualities such as kindness, compassion, forgiveness and understanding. Do not communicate these as though they were the reserve of ethics or religion. Show them that these qualities are indispensable for the happiness and survival of everyone*.*
> ***Dalai Lama*, Daily Advice from the Heart**

apsara a goddess or celestial nymph, usually seen dancing.
arhat is a being who has managed to become free from the cycle of existence which is called 'samsara'. Arhats are not often seen as icons, but when they are, their faces have moustaches and beards. The 16 arhats are the original disciples of Buddha.

bangrim the steps of a stupa.
bharal species of blue sheep.
bindu the very top of a stupa.
Bardo the intermediate state between life and death; considered to be of 49 days' duration, before the soul finds a new body in which to be reincarnated.
Bon pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet.
bumpa the dome of a stupa.

Cham dances are performed by monks during festivals; religious dance/dramas with colourful costumes and masks.
chang home-brewed barley wine/beer, sometimes made with other grain.
charnel ground sky burial site.
chorten is similar in shape to a small stupa; they do not normally contain relics. They are mostly found in high Buddhist mountain country. Chortens are seen in profusion across Ladakh.
chu river.
chuba Tibetan national dress.

dharma is the teachings of Buddhism as a whole; the path to enlightenment; a way of alleviating suffering.
dorje or vajra is the thunderbolt. It destroys ignorance. It is a metal object found at many temples and shrines. It is the symbol of Indra, and in Tantra it is the male principle.
drubchu sacred spring.
drubkhang hermitage for meditation.
dukhang is the main assembly hall of the monastery, where monks collectively come to offer prayer and meditation.

dZi long Tibetan bead, brown or black with white markings, worn around the neck in combination with turquoise and/or coral. Said to be ‘precious jewels of supernatural origin’, they are found underground and are considered to have come from the gods. Some are considered so valuable that their owners will not sell them for any amount of money. Geologically it is etched agate or banded chalcedony.
Dzogchen means literally ‘Great Perfection’; a form of meditation of the Nyingma-pa and Kagyu-pa, practised to seek a ‘a direct realisation of the nature of the mind’
dzong fortress, castle

eight auspicious symbols umbrella, fish, conch shell, eternal knot, vase, wheel, victory banner and flower.

ghaou the turquoise star necklace worn by women at their wedding ceremony, often around 25cm in diameter.
gonkhang is a smaller chamber devoted to the protecting deities. Often dark and somewhat forbidding, this room may well house the images of Yamantaka, Mahakala and Palden Lhamo, among others.

harmika the square part of a stupa, between the dome and the spire. Often has eyes painted on it.
Hinayana the small vehicle of Buddhism, in which one is concerned with one’s own liberation alone, and not that of the greater world of all sentient beings.

incarnation human form taken by a lama after a previous human life has ended.

Kalachakra initiation - participants can gain help in liberation from suffering. Teacher and student alike seek peace of mind, using mantras, yoga and meditations.
Kangyur the part of the Buddhist ‘Bible’ containing the teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni. Its compilation is attributed to Buton Rinchendrub.
Kham the eastern part of Tibet, from where the current Dalai Lama comes.
khang house or building, sometimes used as an abbreviation of Lhakhang.
khyang Asiatic wild ass (Equus hemionus Pallas).
kira waistband worn with Chuba Tibetan national dress.
kumbum a stupa containing many thousands of images, sometimes called a Tashi Gomang stupa.

la mountain pass.

lama (guru in Sanskrit)a religious teacher and guide. Can be male or female. Very few monks and even fewer nuns are considered to be lamas.
lha spirit.
lhakhang temple within a monastery.
Losar Tibetan new year festival.

Mahayana the greater vehicle of Buddhism. Practitioners are dedicated to serving the welfare of all sentient beings, not only themselves
mandala in art, this is a circular pattern made of many colours, often a square or squares within a circle. Represents 'the divine abode of an enlightened being visualised during Tantric practices.'
mantra a series of Sanskrit syllables, not always words with an absolute meaning. Chanting these sounds is thought to create particular effects in the minds of oneself and others.
mudra a hand position, indicating a particular attitude in a Buddha or bodhisattva.

naga a snake or serpent god.

pandit a learned person.
phurba the ritual dagger carried by Vajrakila.
Potala the Dalai Lama's palace in Lhasa.
prayer flag cotton flags in five colours on which are printed prayers. These flutter in the wind sending prayers direct to heaven. The colours represent the five elements: earth, fire, air, water, and ether.
prayer wheel a metal wheel engraved with Tibetan script and containing prayers. May either be large and fixed into a wall, or hand held and spun while walking. Either way, the action of spinning the wheel activates the prayers.
puja a ceremony offering prayers, usually for a specific purpose such as blessing a house, for example.

mani stone a (usually large) rock covered with engraved Buddhist mantras, sometimes painted.
mani wall a long wall made of flat stones with Buddhist mantras engraved on them. May also contain prayer wheels. You should always walk past one of the these walls clockwise, i.e. with the wall on your right.

samsara is the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Ordinary reality, an endless cycle of frustration and suffering, is the result of karma.
sangha the community of Buddhists; one of the 'three jewels' of Buddhism. Sometimes used to refer to only monks and nuns, it can also mean all Buddhist practitioners.
serdung a stupa containing relics and made of gold; normally contains the relics of a very great lama.

Shambhala the mythical land, thought to lie north of Tibet.
stupa is a large monument, usually with a square base, a dome on top and a pointed spire on top of that. The spire on top represents the levels towards enlightenment. A stupa might host the remains of a revered lama or teacher. In this case they are called reliquary stupas, as they contain the ‘relics’ or bones, and sometimes precious items, used by the deceased. Walking round a stupa in a clockwise direction is thought to bring great merit
sutra a teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha. The Kangyur is made up of a collection of these texts. These are the exoteric teachings of Buddha, as opposed to the esoteric teachings of the Tantras.

tangka see thangka.
tantra Oral teachings and Buddhist scriptures forming part of the Kangyur, describing the use of mantras, mandalas and deities in meditation, and yoga for rechanelling bodily energies. The four classes of Tantra are: kriya (action), charya (performance), yoga and supreme yoga. The word is commonly associated with physical sexual methods of striving for enlightenment but is equally applicable to meditation methods using the energies of the mind.
Tangyur The part of the Buddhist ‘bible’ which contains Indian treatises or commentaries on the Buddha’s teachings, as opposed to the Kangyur, made up of Sutras, Buddha’s own teachings. Its compilation is attributed to Buton Rinchendrub.
tathagata Another name for a fully enlightened Buddha. Literally it means ‘One who has gone thus’.
terma texts and sacred objects hidden in safe places on the Tibetan plateau during the time of Padma Sambhava, to be discovered at a later auspicious date by the tertons.
terton A person who discovered Padma Sambhava’s hidden texts in Tibet during the early years of Buddhism’s dissemination there.
thangka or **tangka** a religious painting, usually on silk fabric. Seen in all monasteries hanging on the walls or pillars.
torma a cake made of tsampa, butter and sugar. Used as an offering during religious ceremonies
tsampa roasted barley; the Tibetan staple food. Mixed with butter tea, it is made into a sort of porridge and eaten with the fingers.
tsa-tsa small shapes made of clay, usually mixed with relics or sacred items. Often made of the ashes of deceased lamas and placed inside reliquary stupas.
tulku an incarnate lama.
Tushita often referred to as Tushita heaven; the place where the future Buddha Maitreya now lives.

vajra see dorje.
vihara a large Buddhist temple.
yab-yum the depiction of two deities, male and female, in sexual union. Literally it means father-mother. The male represents

compassion and the female wisdom. Deities found in this position depict not just a physical union, but the spiritual union that reaches to the pinnacle of awareness. This joining brings about a transformation of the fires and energies of passion to give everlasting long life.

yidam a tutelary deity; the deity with whom a Tantric practitioner feels a special affinity or closeness, and whom he/she visualises in meditation

yogi an advanced practitioner of Tantric meditation; male

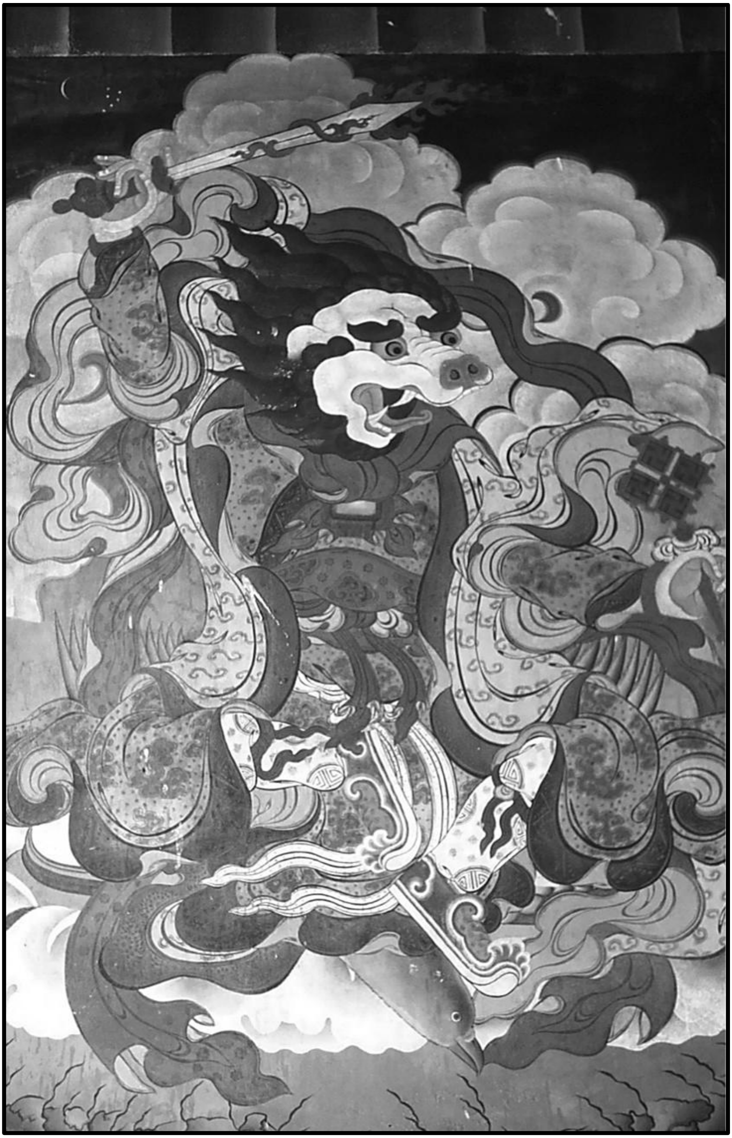
yogini an advanced practitioner of Tantric meditation; female

Yoghurt festival an end of summer festival held in Lhasa on the 29th day of the 6th month

zi see dZi.

Zimchung is the head lama's chamber, often on the roof area.

Nyipangse Bon masked dancer



Amazingly detailed paintings and murals decorate the monasteries across the Spiti region in Himachal Pradesh

Appendix 4: Useful contacts

Tour operators in Nepal

Ama Dablam Adventures www.amadablamadventures.com
Climbing Himalaya www.climbinghimalaya.com
Dream Himalaya www.dreamhimalaya.com.np
Explore Dolpo www.exploredolpotrekking.com
Friends Adventure Team www.friendsadventure.com
Off the Wall www.offthewalltrekking.com
Responsible Treks www.responsibletreks.com
Sacred Himalaya www.sacredhimalaya.com
Sherpa Adventure Travel www.sherpaadventure.com
3 Sisters Adventure www.3sistersadventure.com
Snow Cat Travel www.snowcattravel.com
Trip Himalaya www.triphimalaya.com

The authors have either worked with these trekking providers or know them from experience; many more can be found online.

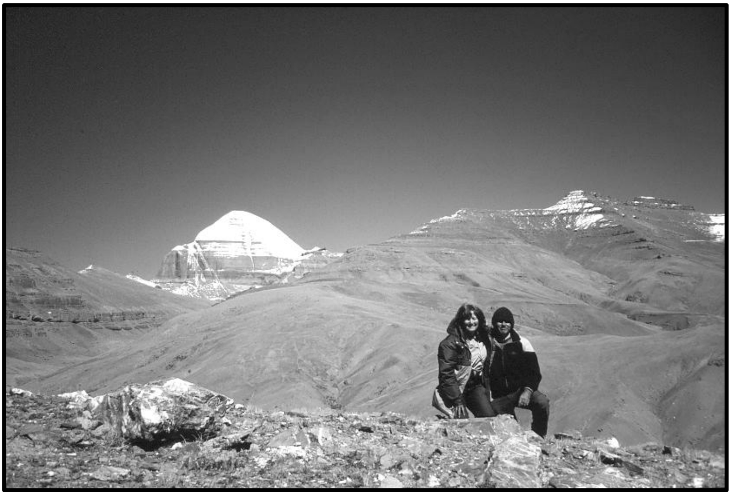
Tour operators overseas

Exodus www.exodus.co.uk
Intrepid Travel www.intrepidtravel.com
Kamzang Journeys www.kamzangjourneys.com
KE Adventure Travel www.keadventure.com
Mountain Kingdoms www.mountainkingdoms.com
The Mountain Company www.themountaincompany.com
World Expeditions www.worldexpeditions.co.uk
Navo Tours www.navo-tour.com, in Chengdu, China for Tours or Self-Drive in Tibet
Band Box Heights & Valleys, Shimla

Online information

www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice – travel advice and tips
www.himalayanrescue.org – rescue information
www.nepalimmigration.gov.np – immigration department
www.nepalmountaineering.org
www.taan.org.np – Trekking Agencies’ Association of Nepal
www.visitnepal.com – travel information
www.welcomenepal.com – tourist information
www.stanfords.co.uk – maps
www.shambhala.org
www.snowlionpub.com
www.tibet.com
www.tibetan.review
www.tibetfoundation.org
www.tibetsociety.com
www.tibet-house-trust.co.uk
www.wisdompubs.org

About the authors



Authors on the ridge above Darchen with Mount Kailash

Siân Pritchard-Jones and Bob Gibbons met in 1983, on a trek from Kashmir to Ladakh. By then Bob had already driven an ancient Land Rover from England to Kathmandu (in 1974), and overland trucks across Asia, Africa and South America. He had also lived in Kathmandu for two years, employed as a trekking company manager. Before they met, Siân worked in computer programming and systems analysis. Since they met they have been leading and organising treks in the Alps, Nepal and the Sahara, as well as driving a bus overland to Nepal. Journeys by a less ancient (only 31-year-old) Land Rover from England to South Africa provided the basis for several editions of the Bradt guide **Africa Overland**, including the seventh edition published in April 2022.

In 2007 they wrote the Cicerone guide to **Mount Kailash** and Western Tibet, as well updating the **Grand Canyon** guide. Their **Annapurna** trekking guide was first published by Cicerone in January 2013, with the latest edition in early 2022. In 2015 they were in Nepal during the earthquakes and published **Earthquake Diaries: Nepal 2015**. **In Search of the Green-Eyed Yellow Idol**, a 50-year travelogue & autobiography is published by Expedition World /Amazon. **Kanchi's Tale** is a series of books covering various expeditions, real and imaginary, as seen through the eyes of a young Nepalese mountain dog – an educational doggie travelogue! For Map House they have written a series of trekking guidebooks: **Himalayan Travel Guides**. See back page for titles so far published. All books are also available on Amazon websites worldwide.

Pilgrims Book House

Pilgrims was founded by Rama Tiwari in the 1984 in Varanasi, India. At first a simple sales operation on a street corner, it grew into a fabulous shop selling books covering history, culture, spiritualism, art, exploration and every aspect of the Himalaya, India and beyond. Some titles were published under Book Faith India (BFI).

A shop was opened in Kathmandu and slowly a publishing business evolved. Out-of-print and out-of-copyright books were painstakingly reprinted, recreating some of the classic historic books of the region virtually lost to a current audience. Today Pilgrims still seeks out those books that reflect its own philosophy of adventure, learning, cultural and spiritual awareness.

Some classic titles from Pilgrims

Among the Himalayas	L. A. Waddell
Climbing the Fish's Tail	Wilfred Noyce
Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance 1921	C. K. Howard-Bury
The Epic of Mount Everest	Sir Francis Younghusband
The Fight for Everest	E. F. Norton
Round Kanchenjunga	Douglas Freshfield
Attack on Everest	Hugh Ruttledge
The Kangchenjunga Adventure	F. S. Smythe
The Land of the Sherpas	Ella Maillart
Peaks and Lamas	Marco Pallis
Tantric Healing in the Kathmandu Valley	Angela Dietrich
A History of Western Tibet	Rev. A. H. Francke
Tibetan Paintings	George Roerich
Altai Himalaya	Nicholas Roerich
Shrines of a Thousand Buddhas	Giuseppe Tucci
Seven Years in Tibet	Heinrich Harrer
Twenty Years in Tibet	David MacDonald
Nepal Vols I and II	Perceval Landon
Sacred Symbols of Hinduism	Jo Santiago
Sacred Symbols of Buddhism	Jo Santiago
My Kind of Kathmandu	Desmond Doig
Power Places of Kathmandu	Dowman and Bubriski
The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism	Antoinette Gordon
The People of Tibet	Charles Bell
Buddhists & Glaciers of Western Tibet	Giotto Dainelli

For more titles see www.pilgrimsonlineshop.com

Other books by the authors

Bradt (www.bradtguides.com)
Africa Overland --- 2005, 2009, 2014, 2022

Cicerone (www.cicerone.co.uk)
The Mount Kailash Trek --- 2007
Annapurna: A Trekker’s Guide --- 2013, 2016, 2022

Amazon / Kindle (www.amazon.com)
In Search of the Green-Eyed Yellow Idol --- 2015, 2023 autobiography
Earthquake Diaries: Nepal 2015 --- 2015, 2022
Australia: Red Centre Treks --- 2016
Kanchi’s Tale: Kanchi goes to Makalu Base Camp --- 2017
Kanchi goes to the Tibesti, Chad --- 2017
Chad: Tibesti, Ennedi & Borkou --- 2017, 2020
Karakoram: The Highway of History --- 2018, 2021
Karakoram & K2 Concordia (trekking guide) --- 2019, 2021
Ladakh: Land of Mystical Monasteries --- 2018, 2023
Lebanon: A Brief Guide --- 2019
Saudi Arabia: A Traveller’s Guide --- 2020, 2023
Kathmandu: Valley of the Green-Eyed Yellow Idol --- 2021
Dad’s War: A Schoolboy’s Diaries --- 2021
Tough Medicine: A Doctor in Nepal (Dr Kailash Sah) --- 2021
Living Art of Kathmandu --- 2022
Iraqi Kurdistan: A Brief Guide --- 2022
Kailash and Guge: Lands of the Tantric Mountain --- 2022
Bhutan: An Introductory Guide --- 2022, 2025
Yemen: A Traveller’s Guide --- 2023
Corsica by Road --- 2023
Zanskar: Land of Monasteries & Mountains --- 2023
Oman by Road --- 2024
Afghanistan: A Traveller’s Guide --- 2025
Tibet: A Traveller’s Guide --- 2026

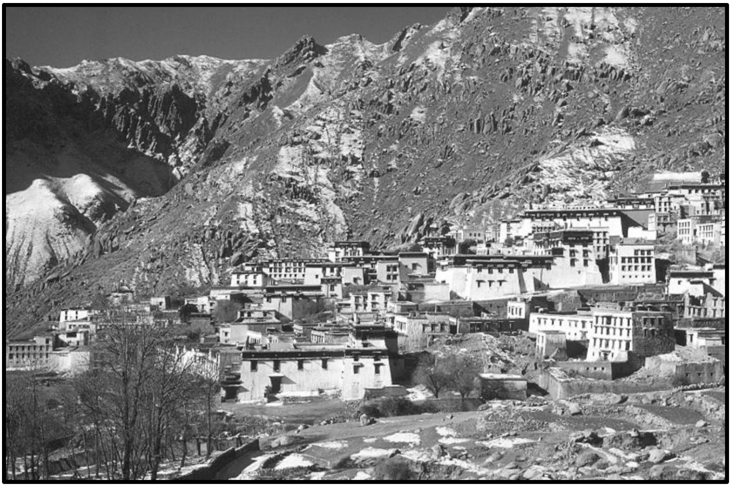
Pictorial Guides: Amazon / Kindle (www.amazon.com)
The Horn of Africa: A Pictorial Guide --- 2016, 2020
South America: A Pictorial Guide --- 2020
Africa Overland: A Pictorial Guide --- 2020
Asia Overland: A Pictorial Guide --- 2020
Saudi Arabia: A Pictorial Guide --- 2020
China: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
Tibet: A Pictorial Guide --- 2020, 2025
Nepal Himalaya: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
India: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
Indian Himalaya, Karakoram & Bhutan: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
Southeast Asia: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
Far East Asia: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
Central Asia, Russia & the Caucasus: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
Central America and the Caribbean: A Pictorial Guide --- 2022

Other books by the authors

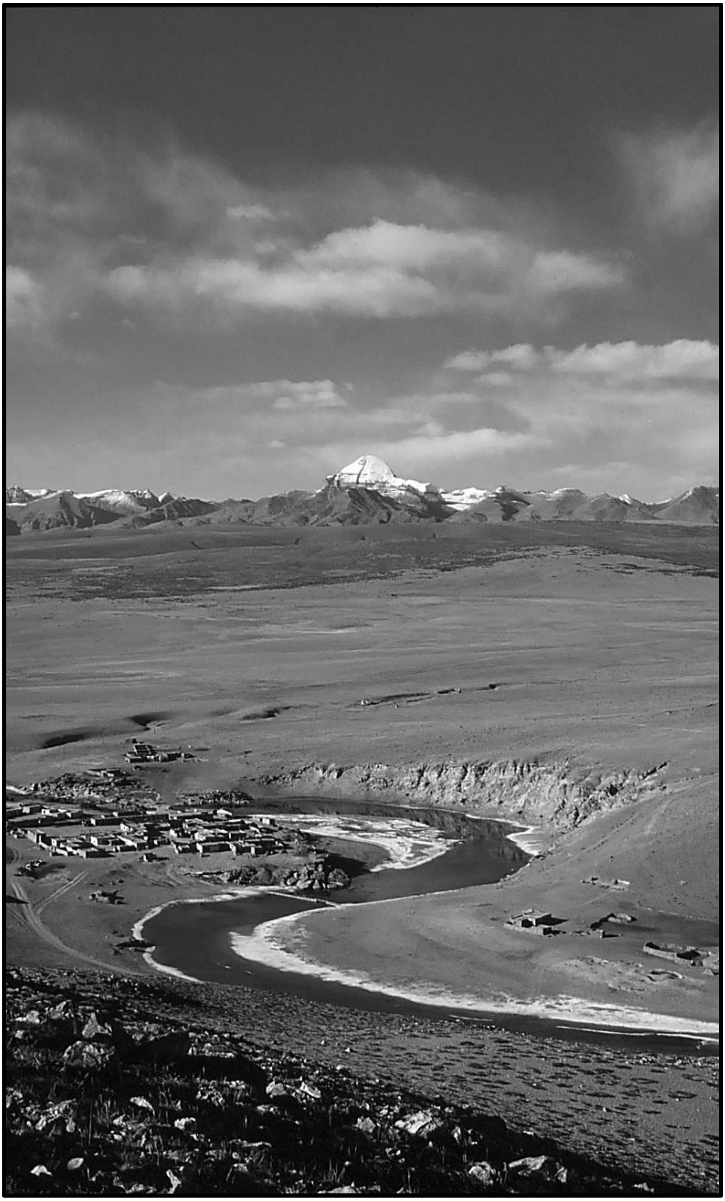
America's Wild West: A Pictorial Guide --- 2021
The Alps: A Pictorial Guide --- 2022
Iraq: A Pictorial Guide --- 2023
Yemen: A Pictorial Guide --- 2023
Australia, New Zealand & Pacific: A Pictorial Guide --- 2024
Afghanistan: A Pictorial Guide --- 2025

Pilgrims (www.pilgrimsonlineshop.com)
Kathmandu: Valley of the Green-Eyed Yellow Idol --- 2005
Ladakh: Land of Magical Monasteries --- 2006
Kailash & Guge: Land of the Tantric Mountain --- 2006

Map House (www.maphouse.org)
Himalayan Travel Guides HTG (www.himalayantravelguides.com)
& Amazon worldwide (www.amazon.com)
Manaslu & Tsum Valley --- 2013, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2023
Dolpo --- 2014, 2019, 2020, 2022
Ganesh Himal --- 2014, 2019, 2023
Langtang --- 2014, 2018, 2020, 2024
Everest --- 2014, 2018, 2021, 2022
Rolwaling --- 2015, 2019, 2023
Mustang --- 2016, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2025
Mustang by Road --- 2025
Kanchenjunga --- 2017, 2020, 2023
Makalu --- 2017, 2020, 2023, 2026
West Nepal --- 2017, 2021, 2023
Dhaulagiri --- 2018, 2023
Nepal Himalaya --- 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2023, 2024
Annapurna North Base Camp --- 2023
Jugal Himal --- 2024



Drepung, the famous Gelugpa monastery near Lhasa



Kailash from Chui village